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FREDA WAS WITHOUT EXCEPTION THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE ROOM.

COURTNEY'S CHOICE.

[A NOVELETTE.]

PROLOGUE.

It was the height of the London season, and Mrs. Adeline Colthrop having languidly toyed with a late breakfast for which she had no appetite, visited the nursery for five minutes' play with her little son, and thus having appeased the maternal conscience, proceeded with a placid mind to her drawing-room.

It was a magnificent apartment magnificently furnished.

Every single article of furniture gave the beholder an idea of unbounded wealth, lavishly applied; and yet the general effect was not altogether pleasing.

It gave one the idea, as one of her friends once remarked, of the show-room in a fashionable upholsterer's.

Looked at from this point of view the observa-

tion of another friend was perhaps even yet more unkind.

"Mrs. Colthrop and her drawing-room are admirably suited to each other," pronounced Lady Alton, whose opinion had once been asked, concerning the taste displayed in furnishing number 23 Ruyssdel-square, and the verdict was eminently just.

Adeline Colthrop was a large blonde, strikingly handsome in a showy sort of way. Thick coils of silky yellow hair were loosely twisted over her well-shaped head, and braided in a knot at the back.

Her forehead was broad and rounded, and her features regular, almost what one might designate classical.

She had a pink-and-white complexion, the envy and despair of her lady friends, who affected to consider it as a triumph of art, though in this case rumour was at fault.

Her eyes were of a soft dreamy blue, and were fringed with long deep lashes.

In build she was tall and ample, but beautifully proportioned, and her movements though slow and languid, were not devoid of a certain natural grace.

Her one defect, from a physical standard, lay in the lower half of her face, which for a woman was a trifle too heavy and massive, and contrasted strongly with the dreamy look of the blue eyes.

Her friends, who, by the way, were mostly of the male sex, averred that this only added an air of decision to her countenance, though to a casual spectator, it betokened a harsh and unfeeling disposition.

Judged by the opinion of her servants she was not a bad mistress.

"Do your work," said the cook when a new-comer came, which was not often, "and you will get good wages, and no questions asked about anything." She, with a wave of the hand towards the drawing-room, "never pokes her nose into anybody's business. Only"—and here the voice would take on a warning tone, "if everything isn't done right, and to the very minute, you can pack up your things and go."

In real truth Mrs. Colthrop was a splendid specimen of that not uncommon type of humanity which is composed almost entirely of selfishness.

She had her good points of course. In all money matters she was extremely liberal, even

lavish, and as long as her personal comfort was not interfered with, you could command her services.

If you were ill she would cheerfully pay for a private bed in the hospital, and just as cheerfully provide the money for your burial, but you must not expect her to sympathise with you, or express any sorrow at the hardness of your lot.

Such was the nature of the woman, who now reclining on a luxurious couch, drew a letter from her pocket, and proceeded to read it with every sign of impatience.

"It is ridiculous," she murmured, as she finally replaced the note with a gesture of irritation, "utterly ridiculous, and I must have been foolish to have consented to it. What good can it do? That leaf in my book was turned down long since and now we are to have it all over again; I declare I feel inclined to send and forbid his coming. Poor simple dreamer! how fortunate that I read his character right in the bygone days," and she cast a complacent glance around the handsome apartment.

"And yet," she continued reflectively, "Nellie believed in him, and sacrificed her happiness to him. But Nellie was always a child, with a child's belief in abstract goodness, and the nobility of virtue. Poor little fool, much good it did her. Poverty, curbing care, a miserable worldly existence, and an early death—these were her rewards. Her love must indeed have been a marvellous gift, if it balanced such horrors as these."

Once more the blue eyes drifted dreamily from one evidence to another of her own wealth, and she smiled contentedly.

"No," she said aloud, "it was I who chose the better part. Luxury and ease, and comfort, these are what I gained. And my loss, what was that? Nellie's wretched lot, and the fanciful dreams of a foolish enthusiast."

Had anyone hinted to the magnificent woman lying there in the midst of her luxurious surroundings, that the despised sister now under her grave had been far more truly happy than Mrs. Adeline Colthrop, with all her princely wealth, she would mentally have classed such a person as a lunatic and an imbecile.

Happiness without money! happiness in a mean little dwelling in the East End, where one had to struggle incessantly with each recurring day to keep the gaunt wolf of poverty from the ever-open door; the thing was an impossibility, a fable, an old wife's tale, devised by another such daddling enthusiast as Frank Denbigh himself.

To live without servants, to make one's own clothes, and were still to mend them to count out pennies as though they were thousands of pounds, to live without a single luxury from one end of the year to another, sometimes even to be compelled to go without bare necessities, and in the midst of it all to prize of happiness.

Bah, the very idea savoured of insanity.

And yet after all what did she know? This woman with the physical beauty of an ancient goddess, and with a heart of stone. Her pulse had never quickened, her heart had never throbbed one beat the faster, at the approach of some loved footstep. Her eyes had never glowed with an answering smile, when some dear one, flashed, perhaps, with a trivial success, had gazed with fond affection into her joyous face. She was a mother, but she had never known the holy joy of a mother's love. No soft baby fingers had ever clung around that fair white throat; no innocent baby face had ever nestled in her bosom. She had never at the long evening through, patiently stitching some tiny article, and drawing in a wondrous joy with every breath.

She loved her own child it is true, but it was in her own way, and her love was only another name for selfishness. She was proud of him, proud of his strong, straight limbs and his handsome face, but chiefly on account of the glory it reflected upon herself.

He was good to look upon even now, and he belonged to her—she might have added like the chef d'œuvres of the old masters which hung in her dining-room, or the unparalleled collection of Colthrop jewels. At present she extorted admira-

tion through her beauty and her wealth; in the days to come she would be envied and admired as Courtney's mother.

Presently she glanced at the jewelled clock opposite her; it was nearly time for her visitor's ring. She had not seen him now for eight years, save once when she stood at the bedside of his dying wife; but her colour did not fade nor heighten, nor did she betray the faintest sign of emotion as the servant threw open the door and announced Mr. Frank Denbigh.

But when she saw what manner of man it was who had sought this interview even her triple shield of selfishness was for the moment pierced, and a strange, unaccustomed sensation of pity found its way into her bosom.

Long years of toil and anxious cares, of grinding poverty and enervating privation, perhaps most of all, of that hope deferred which maketh the heart sick, had broken down Frank Denbigh's erstwhile fine physique, and made of him a physical wreck.

He was tall, above the average, but now the shoulders were bent, the head drooping. The thick clusters of curling black hair which she remembered as in a vision, had disappeared to be replaced by a few thin straggling gray locks. The beautiful face was marred and disfigured by multitudinous lines of care and seamed with sorrow; the once proud eyes were heavy and sunken, and the effort to draw a single breath stabbed him like a sharp knife. His hands were white and sharply pointed fingers long and tapering, but, oh, so thin, so cruelly thin! The blue veins stood up beneath the fair skin, and so little flesh was there, that one might almost have peered through. His limbs too were shrunken and skeleton-like, and his worn, faded clothes hung loosely about him. On either cheek glowed a vivid hectic flush, which too plainly betrayed the sad story, which was painfully confirmed by his emaciated figure.

Clinging to one thin hand was a little girl, who from time to time gazed upward, lovingly but apprehensively into the man's face.

For once in her life Mrs. Adeline Colthrop's feelings were genuinely touched, and in the pity caused by the sight of this human ruin, she even forgot her own personal discomfort in being compelled to gaze upon it.

"Mr. Denbigh," she said, "you are ill; pray be seated. You should not have ventured from your house in this state; had I known this I would have come to you," and she motioned him to a comfortable chair.

A faint smile, barely perceptible, hovered round the worn lips.

"You are very kind," he murmured; "but there is no necessity to trespass on your goodness. I am indeed far from strong, but my little strength will serve me while I perform my errand. It is a very simple one, and if you will allow one of your servants to take charge of my little girl, I need not detain you many minutes."

She rang the bell instantly.

"Take Miss Denbigh to the nursery," she said to the domestic, "and let her play with Master Courtney."

At a word from her father the child left the room, though the pretty eyes filled with unbidden tears at the thought of even this temporary banishment from her loving parent.

"Only for a few minutes darling," he whispered, but as the door closed, a heavy sigh rose from his heart; so soon alas would the separation be for ever.

But Frank Denbigh though physically weak was mentally strong, and resolutely rolling back the wave of sorrow which threatened to engulf him he turned and confronted his hostess.

"Adeline!" he said, brokenly, "the time has arrived when I am compelled to fulfil the promise uttered at the bedside of my dying wife. When my darling lay sick unto death, I promised her that should I die while our precious Freda was still a child, I would come to you with your dear sister's last request! 'Ask her, Frank,' she whispered with almost her latest breath, 'to take my darling under her care, to watch over and guard her from evil, to treat her as though she were her own child.' These are Nellie's words and it was to bring this message I have

come here to-day. I could not delay longer; your own senses will show you that I am already a dying man. My days, nay even my very hours are numbered; in a short time my Freda will be a fatherless as well as a motherless girl. For her sake and for the sake of my lost darling, I beg you to grant your sister's request."

She gazed at him long and earnestly. This was the man to whom she had once vowed to be a faithful and loving wife; this was the man whom she had heartlessly jilted for a rich libertine, and the old dead days sprang anew into life.

She had loved him once; as much as her selfish nature would allow her to love anyone but herself, and a spark of the old feeling came back now.

For a moment she felt capable of a heroic sacrifice, and a wild idea surged through her brain to devote herself to his welfare, to nurse him back to health and strength, to atone in some measure for the wrong she had done him.

It was of course but a fleeting chimera of the imagination; a noble resolve strangled in its birth, but it was the first stab of human sympathy she had felt for years, and may have counted for something in the book of the recording angel.

Once again she looked into his face, and what she saw there revealed too plainly the utter impossibility of her half-fledged plan, and holding out her hand she said softly,—

"It is useless to discuss the past, let the dead bury its dead. Regrets now are futile, what has been done has been done and nothing can alter it, but in this one thing I will give you my word. If it has the power to lighten the gloom of your last hours—if it can bring one ray of sunlight into the shadowed valley whither you are descending, then rest assured that I will faithfully perform my duty to your child."

He took her hand and pressed it lightly.

"I trust you," he said, simply, "and I thank you in Nellie's name and my own. Let her remain with me until the end comes, for she loves me dearly. And now I must go, my strength begins to fail me. My landlady has your address, she will send to you when all is over."

"Let me order the carriage," she said, eagerly, "you are too weak to undertake the journey, you will fall in the street."

He smiled feebly.

"I thank you for your offer," he replied; "but I will walk; it is the last time my little darling will see me outside the house."

She did not press him further; but rang the bell for Freda.

"Kiss the lady, Freda," said her father, "she is your Aunt Adeline; and some day if you are a good girl you are to come and stay with her."

The child did as she was ordered, and regained her father's side with a shiver. Into the childish brain there crept a grim dark shadow of some undefined evil, which enveloped the little life in a tragic gloom.

Then with a dignified farewell of his hostess he took the child's hand, and the pair passed from the room—the dying father and his child—a pitiful touching sight.

Frank Denbigh's prophecy did not prove false. Once at home he took to his bed, where for a few days he lay, growing ever weaker and weaker, until he had scarcely strength to toy with Freda's golden hair, until the poor dimmed eyes could hardly distinguish the pretty innocent face, and the feeble voice could not do more than whisper the loved name.

The end was very pathetic. Into the mean chamber shone the last rays of the setting sun, lighting the different objects with a crimson, from which the brightness was already fading, and throwing its light upon the bed where Frank Denbigh lay.

His face was white and bloodless, but a momentary vigour had returned to his limbs; his eyes had recovered a portion of their wonted fire, and the tones of his voice were low and clear.

Freda lay by his side, her arms thrown around his neck, the beautiful face pressed close to his own cheeks, and the large mournful eyes gazing sadly into his. He patted her tenderly, and passed his emaciated fingers gently through her sun-kissed tresses.

"Freda," he whispered, "I am going away into a far-off land, to which as yet you cannot come. You will be a good girl, Freda, will you not? Your Aunt Adeline will take care of you. Kiss me, pet, and always remember that your dear mother and father are watching over you. Be good, my dear, be good! Her mother's eyes her mother's face! Ah! Nellie, darling, would that I could bring her to you. Farewell little one, kiss me again, lay your sweet face to mine that I may feel you. Closer, ever closer."

And so with this child's tears streaming like rain on to his face, Frank Denbigh passed away. Many a stronger man and a wiser have followed and will follow him to that mysterious bourne, but none has ever lived a purer life, none breathed a nobler spirit.

Weak, perhaps, and fanciful, a dreamer of dreams, a seer of visions, unfitted to make headway against the rushing torrent of modern life; but still with a sweet and tender soul, a serene courage which never deserted him, with lofty aims and a glorious ambition, even in his failure he worked more good than many a far more successful man.

They buried him quietly and without ostentation, none following his simple coffin, save a few poor faithful friends, whom in life he had assisted out of his own scanty store.

The next day Mrs. Colthrop's magnificent carriage appeared at the end of the street, and the neighbours looking from their windows beheld a little sad-eyed child, dressed in black, and attended by a stout elderly woman, walk slowly along.

The parting of the ways had come for Freda Denbigh. She was bidding a last farewell to the home, where in spite of poverty she had been so happy, and where also her young heart had been crushed by the death of both her parents.

CHAPTER I.

LADY FAUDELL'S ball was undoubtedly the success of the season, and the face of the genial hostess was wreathed in smiles as she moved gracefully among her guests, amongst whom, seated comfortably in a comfortable corner of the room, was Mrs. Adeline Colthrop.

Sixteen years have passed since we last saw her, and though her dancing days are over she is a handsome woman still.

Time and fate have dealt gently with her; her brow is unruined; her cheeks free from a single line of care; sorrow and suffering have passed her by as though she alone were exempt from the common lot of humanity.

To-night her happiness is even greater than usual, for that which she had long foreseen is just beginning to happen; people have begun to speak of her as the mother of the handsome and accomplished Mr. Colthrop.

She has lived one life of pleasure. For years she has been fêted and caressed for her own beauty, and now she will live in the glory reflected from the halo which surrounds Courtney.

Even now she does not love him with a mother's affection. She is proud of him; proud of his physical beauty, of his talents, of his graceful manners, and especially of the homage accorded to him by his *compères*.

For these things she idolises him; he is a demigod who extorts admiration and worship—and he is here.

She smiles complacently at her hostess, as that lady pauses near her seat, and makes a half-motion in the direction of a young couple slowly passing down the room.

"They are well-matched, dear Adeline," whispers Lady Faudell, sweetly, "are they not?" and her guest replies with a look of meaning approbation.

The dance had just ended, and Courtney Colthrop was leading his fair partner back.

Tall and straight of limb he stood with well-shaped head held erect, regular, clearly-cut features, firm lips, the upper one shaded by a heavy moustache, and wonderful brown eyes, that seemed capable of rendering a dozen different emotions.

His companion, too, was tall and graceful. Her complexion though dark was singularly clear, and she moved with a supple ease and grace that was charming to behold.

But perhaps her greatest beauty lay in her eyes, which flashed and sparkled incessantly. No one who had ever come under the spell of Helen Faudell's eyes questioned her claims to beauty.

Just now she was particularly fascinating. The lights and the glitter, the throng of fair women and handsome men, the sweet strains of music, the rhythmic movements of the dance just finished, all combined to excite her, to tinge her cheeks with a warm red glow, and to lend an added light to the sparkling eyes.

This was the picture which Mrs. Colthrop found so pleasing, and more than one man shaped her thoughts into words as he said,—

"The bells of the season and the greatest catch; they ought to be happy."

Mrs. Colthrop was suddenly aroused from her reverie—Lady Faudell had passed on—by a remark from her neighbour, Mrs. Warley, one of those disagreeable old women who possess a sort of seventh sense for picking out matters of an unpleasant nature—

"It is a pity Lady Faudell did not train the girl to hide her feelings better," she said caressingly, "she will make herself a perfect laughing-stock, and Courtney ought to be ashamed to encourage it."

Mrs. Colthrop's eyes opened widely; evidently she thought the woman's mind wandering, but her companion continued calmly,—

"Do you mean me to understand that you cannot see what is going on? Yes! Then I'll tell you. Helen Faudell is falling in love with Courtney, who has no more intention of making her his wife than he has of marrying me."

Mrs. Colthrop made a gesture of impatience, but she could not free herself; the elder lady was a privileged person not lightly to be offended.

"It is very annoying, naturally," the latter went on, "but then you see, my dear, these things never do turn out as one would wish them. But I need not waste breath in talking—see for yourself."

The musicians were playing the opening bars of a waltz tune, and once again Courtney Colthrop crossed the room with a lady on his arm.

Quite a girl she was, simply but becomingly dressed; a girl with a complexion like a peach, and a wondrous mass of yellow hair.

Her eyes in colour were a violet-blue, soft and sweet; her mouth was small and perfectly shaped, and the white, even teeth glistened between the rose-tinted lips. She was truly a dainty maiden, and in her style as charming as the Lady Helen.

She was such a child, too! So winsome, so engaging, and so absolutely innocent. Her face was a picture of perfect trust, and a spirit of purity looked out from the depths of the violet eyes.

Mrs. Colthrop's face wore its wonted air of serenity, but as she looked, she trembled for the success of her dearly-cherished project. She watched the light kindle in her son's eyes, and she knew that his heart was on fire with love.

She turned irritably to her companion—

"The girl gets pretty," she said, contemptuously.

"She is without exception the most beautiful girl in the room," answered the other aloud, and to herself, "she is what Adeline Colthrop once was, only with the addition of a heart and soul."

"It is high time she began to earn her living; I fear I have been too considerate, it has spoiled her."

Mrs. Warley shrugged her shoulders almost imperceptibly.

"What would you make of her—a governess?"

"Why not?"

"Who would employ a governess with a face and figure like that? If you cannot afford to keep her, let her come to me, I will give her a liberal salary as my companion."

Mrs. Colthrop winced.

"How absurd you are," she cried, angrily, "as though I cared about the expense. It is the principle at which I look. You know Freda has no

means of her own, and I do not wish her to be dependent upon others; it lowers a girl's tone."

Mrs. Warley was, as a rule, a wary old lady, but now her sense of the ridiculous overcame her prudence, and she laughed heartily.

"Oh, good gracious, Adeline dear, don't; my breathing is so difficult that I cannot afford to laugh. Fancy lowering the tone of your own sister's child, by providing her with a crust of bread, and a few dresses."

"Besides," continued Mrs. Colthrop, stiffly, "Courtney may marry now at any time, and his wife would not care to be always confronted with Freda; it is not as if she were his sister."

Mrs. Warley chuckled; the humour of the situation tickled her.

"Upon my word, Adeline," she said presently, "your simplicity is charming. Can you not, or will you not see that the boy is hopelessly in love with his cousin, and I must confess he displays considerable taste in being associated with two girls like Helen Faudell and Freda Denbigh. But why does he not bring her here: the dance is finished."

"She is with the Carstairs family; Emily Carstairs is infatuated with her."

"Ah, well! if Courtney does not marry her, remember my offer is always open. Ah, General!" turning to a stout, florid gentleman of military appearance, who approached them, "you are like the rest of us, I perceive, compelled to seek amusement in a little social chat."

General Hooper smiled good humouredly as he shook hands with the ladies.

"One must not come to Mrs. Warley for compliments," she said; "I can still keep my footing in a decent English dance, though I confess these outlandish things are beyond me; they remind me forcibly of Dervish-twistings."

Presently, the little group was augmented by two or three other men, and the conversation becoming general, no further reference was made to the previous topic, though it lay uppermost in Mrs. Colthrop's mind, and she resolved to speak plainly to Courtney at the first favourable opportunity.

The next morning Freda kept to her room, owing to a violent headache, and mother and son breakfasted alone.

"Can you spare me five minutes?" she asked, as they rose from the table, "I wish to speak to you."

"Certainly, my morning is at your disposal; shall we go into the drawing-room?" and he led the way thinking that his mother wished to consult him upon some little matter of business.

Mrs. Colthrop's opening remark, however, savoured rather of pleasure, since it referred to the ball of the previous night.

"I was pleased to notice how well you appeared to be enjoying yourself at the Faudells," she began.

"Yes! her balls are always charming; one meets so many nice people at them."

"Really! the number of nice people seemed extremely limited. Ah! my dear boy, there is no need to attempt to deceive me. I am delighted. To know that your inclinations and my wishes run together filled my cup of happiness to the brim."

This was a good bold stroke and astounded Courtney, who made no reply.

"Of course," she continued, sweetly, "I would not have mentioned the subject, but both you and the charming Helen betrayed your secret so completely, that it almost formed the sole topic of conversation amongst Lady Faudell's guests. And I must say your choice met with general approval. Everyone applauded it, and my old friends congratulated me sincerely, as they knew my heart had always been set on the match. She is a dear girl, as good as she is beautiful, attractive and accomplished, in short, just the woman to advance your interests in the world—not a girl with a doll's face—and after last night, no one need question whether she loves you."

Courtney stood baffled and perplexed, not knowing what to answer. His mother's superb acting deceived him, and his heart awoke him at the thought of the pain he was about to inflict. Besides, there was Helen to be considered. Could it really be true that she loved him? and

if so, had his conduct been such as to foster a feeling of affection in her breast?

He put the question fairly to himself, and answered it in the negative.

Some men might have been vain of this brilliant conquest, but Courtney thought only of the suffering to the beautiful girl if his mother's story should prove correct.

At all events, he must not deceive his mother and that could be done at once.

"This conversation has caused me much pain," he began awkwardly, "since I am obliged to destroy the pleasant picture your imagination has conjured up. Helen and I are good friends certainly, but nothing more. No word of love has passed between us, and the idea of marrying her has never entered into my head."

Mrs. Colthrop uttered a cry of well simulated amazement. "My dear boy," she said, "you astound me; I had not known that you were so perfect an actor. I wish you had told me you were only trifling with the girl, my ignorance of your true intentions has placed me in a peculiarly awkward position. I am not easily deceived, but in this instance I will confess to having been out-manoeuvred. Like all my friends, I fell into the trap, and honestly accepted their congratulations. I am sorry for Helen, poor girl, for she, at least, was not acting."

Courtney's perplexity changed into anger and mortification.

He was deeply grieved on Helen's account, and bitterly angry at his mother's unjust estimation of his own character.

High above all else he placed his honour and uprightness, and this sneering insinuation that he had been tampering with the affections of an innocent girl wounded him severely.

"It would have been such a suitable match," murmured Mrs. Colthrop meditatively; "however one must learn to bear disappointment. Still even now perhaps it is not too late."

The last part of the sentence was uttered with a view to forcing Courtney's hand and it nearly succeeded.

For a moment he felt tempted to avow his passion for Freda, which he knew intuitively would meet with his mother's stern disapproval; but a feeling of distaste to discuss the topic just then caused him to refrain, and pleading some excuse he retired from the room.

CHAPTER II.

Left alone Mrs. Colthrop congratulated herself upon the apparent success of her policy.

She knew how strained were Courtney's notions of honour, and believed that were he convinced that his behaviour had really caused Helen to love him, he would ask her to be his wife.

In this she judged correctly, for at that very moment the young man was sitting disconsolately in his room, moodily confronting this idea.

Had he really compromised the girl? This was the question to be settled; because if he had, then for his very honour's sake he must ask her to marry him.

All which this meant, should she accept his offer, he realised full well.

He did not love her; no sentiment warmer than that of friendship found a lodging in his breast, and worse still, he loved another.

All the joy of his life was centred in his cousin Freda.

The beautiful dainty maiden who dwelt beneath his mother's roof had long since gained his affections.

She was to him the embodiment of everything sweet and tender and true.

The pure lovely face framed in its luxuriant tresses of yellow hair, haunted him.

The violet-blue eyes with their tender dreamy smile, were for ever gazing into his, all the world to him was but Freda, and in the hope of making her his wife, alone lay his happiness.

Still if honour called, he would on his duty, even though embracing a certain misery.

But was he quite sure that he knew in which direction his duty pointed? Might not his

mother have been mistaken? Even were her surmise correct, was he in fault?

Patiently he reviewed every passage in his life, with which Helen Faudell had been connected. He recalled his words, his actions, every detail that he could possibly bring back, and failed to convict himself.

Even in thought he had been innocent, and ultra-sensitive though he was, he could not pronounce himself guilty of the self-laid charge.

"No," he exclaimed, finally, "I can honestly assert, that in thought, in word and in action alike I am free from blame," and having arrived at this conclusion he felt that a heavy weight was lifted from his mind.

As yet he had said no word to Freda of the love which he bore her, but now he determined that he would confess his passion at the first opportunity.

The chance came on the following evening at Mrs. Wexley's.

Freda was sitting with her aunt, when he went to claim her hand for the next dance, and Mrs. Colthrop seeing danger made a futile effort to avert it.

"The dear girl looks far from well, Courtney, I think she had better remain quietly with me," she said, persuasively.

"Nonsense, mother, there is nothing the matter with Freda; besides this is my only dance with her. If it should over-fatigue her, she can beg off one of her engagements with Fred Vicary. I notice his initials sprinkled liberally over her programme," and without giving Freda time to speak he carried her off in triumph.

"We will not dance, little one," he whispered, softly, "unless you are bent upon it. Let me take you into the conservatory; I wish to speak to you alone, and there seems to be very little chance of doing so in our own house. Will you come?"

She looked into his eyes, and read his purpose. It was obliged to come sooner or later and perhaps after all, it was better to get through with it.

"I do not care particularly about the dance Courtney," she answered, shyly; "I will come with you, if you desire it."

He pressed her hand and led her through the crowded room into the conservatory where they found themselves alone.

"Freda," he began, abruptly, "do you guess what I have to say? I think you do, my darling. I have never concealed my love for you. I am only putting into words the passion which has enslaved me for years. Right back from the time when we were boy and girl together I have loved you, and latterly I have known, that the one great prize in the world for me was the possession of your affection. Freda, little cousin, do you love me? Not as a sister. A sister's love is very sweet and precious, but I wish you to be something nearer and dearer to me than a sister. Freda, darling, have I presumed too much? Have I been mistaken? I thought—and the thought brought me happiness—that you had begun to care for me in the way I mean. But perhaps I was wrong. Tell me dear, have I deceived myself or is it, that this great happiness will be mine?"

The girl turned her blushing face to him, and a look of tender love lay in the depths of her beautiful eyes.

"I do not know," she softly whispered, "if the confession will lower me in your sight, but I will make it. Courtney, I have loved you always, but, dear, I fear we must pluck out this passion from our hearts; it can never be gratified."

Lower like, he kissed her first, kissed the rich red lips again and again until she gently drew herself away.

"Nay," she said, with a pretty blush, "that is not fair. Did you not understand my words?"

"What a question!" he exclaimed, rapturously, "when your answer has made me the happiest man in the world. Still your words were so delightful that they will bear repeating. You love me and will be my wife! Is it not so?"

Freda shook her head sadly.

"I love you truly, but I fear I shall never

marry you. Have you considered what Aunt Adeline will say?"

His brow clouded. This was the weak spot in his armour, and his cousin had seized upon it unerringly. That his mother would object he knew full well, but he trusted that time and a steady perseverance would overcome her opposition; he was yet to learn the true character of Mrs. Adeline Colthrop.

But Freda's question required an answer, and, banishing his gloomy fears, he said brightly,—

"I have thought of that. She will be a little disappointed at first, as I believe she has other views for me, but she will come round in time, when she finds how truly we love each other."

Freda smiled sadly.

"Let us not deceive ourselves, Courtney; this thing can never come to pass. Your mother will oppose it bitterly, to the very end. She will never give her consent, and without that I can never marry you."

"There is a difficulty, darling," he answered, "but believe me you exaggerate its importance. I will see my mother in the morning, and when she knows I am resolute she will yield."

She laid her hand timidly upon his arm.

"Dear Courtney," she said, "be guided this once by my wishes. Do not mention the subject to my aunt at present. We are young, we love each other, and can afford to wait. Sometime, perhaps in the near future, you shall speak, and if you can gain Aunt Adeline's consent to our union, I will marry you; until then we must wait patiently. It is better so—is it not?"

He sighed heavily.

"Your wish is my command," he said, "now and always, but so many things lie hidden in the future, and I am afraid."

"Of one thing," she whispered, "you need have no fear; my love for you at least is certain. Believe in me, as I believe in you, and all will yet be well."

Once more he embraced her, and then they passed out into the crowded room, back to Mrs. Colthrop, for the dance had ended.

"How tiresome, Courtney!" exclaimed that lady impatiently; "Lady Faudell and Helen have been here to bid us good bye, and you have missed them; they are going to Mentone in the morning."

"Very unfortunate truly," assented Courtney; "though, as a matter of fact, I bade them farewell last evening; I was under the impression that their departure had been arranged for to-day."

"They remained purposely to put in an appearance here. Freda, there is your cavalier coming this way. I must say he appears extremely devoted. Take care, child, do not break too many hearts for pastime, and Mr. Vicary is worth more than a passing flirtation."

An angry flush appeared on the girl's cheeks, but before she could frame a suitable reply to her aunt's sneer, the gentleman was with them.

He bowed smilingly to the ladies and shook hands with Courtney, who received his advances somewhat coldly.

The new comer was a tall, fine-looking man of distinguished carriage. His complexion was dark, and he had close black hair and black flashing eyes.

"Miss Denbigh," he said politely, "I believe I have the honour of claiming your hand for this quadrille," and, bowing low to the others, he led her away.

Mrs. Colthrop's eyes were filled with a meaning smile as she followed their movements.

"How fortunate," she exclaimed impressively, "that our dear Freda thinks so highly of her cavalier. He is evidently exceedingly fond of her, and the match will be a most suitable one in every way."

Courtney bit his lip angrily but made no reply, and turned away with a gesture of impatience. Still his mother's words were not wholly thrown away, and as he watched the sunny smiles chasing each other across Freda's face, as she listened to her partner's laughing sallies, he felt how difficult it would be to go on even for a short period and make no sign.

Before retiring to rest that night, Mrs. Colthrop like a prudent general, carefully reviewed the

situation. At present she felt the battle was going against her, she had already been defeated in one skirmish, and in consequence the enemy was more strongly entrenched than ever.

Still she did not despair; she was a woman of resource, and she resolved that by fair means or foul she would prevent her dead sister's pauper daughter becoming Courtney's wife.

The result of her cogitations was a little note, which she sealed carefully and addressed to General Colthrop, Hotel des Anglais, Mentone.

"George will assist me," she said, as she placed the letter in her desk. "I will post it myself in the morning."

For several days matters at Ruydel-square went on in their usual course, save that Courtney found it more and more difficult to obtain any private conversation with his cousin.

One morning, however, just as they were sitting down to luncheon, a telegram was brought in addressed to Mr. Courtney Colthrop.

Courtney opened it and a shade of annoyance crossed his brow.

"From uncle George," he said to his mother, "he is ill at Mentone and requires me at once. I suppose I shall have to go."

"Certainly dear, I will ring for Roberts and have your things packed. I trust it is not very serious. Freda dear, you must carry my excuses this afternoon, I shall stay at home and help Courtney."

"Of course it will be very distressing should the General prove dangerously ill," she confided that night to Freda, whom she had effectually prevented from bidding Courtney farewell, "but if it is only a slight attack, the change will do the boy good. Besides," meditatively, "he will see Helen, and naturally he would welcome anything which would give him that opportunity."

Having shot this shaft which she earnestly hoped would hit the mark, Courtney's mother kissed her niece with a show of affection, and retired to her room well-satisfied with the result of her plot.

CHAPTER III.

A WEEK had elapsed since Courtney's departure for Mentone, and Mrs. Colthrop had taken up her residence at Briancourt, her country house in Wiltshire. Courtney had written once informing them that his uncle did not appear to be very ill, and now as Mrs. Colthrop and Freda sat at breakfast, the former took two letters both stamped with the foreign post-mark, from the bag.

The first which she opened contained only a few lines, and bore the signature of George Colthrop.

"Ah!" exclaimed the lady, as she replaced the letter in its envelope, and glanced round with an air of satisfaction, "I thought so. The General, dear man, has quite recovered, but we must not expect Courtney for a month or two; the attractions at Mentone have proved too powerful for him. Well, it does not surprise me, and I must say I am rejoiced that he has made up his mind at last, for Helen will make him a good wife. But I wonder what the dear boy says about it himself; he is such a cautious fellow," and thus talking, half to herself and half to Freda she opened the other letter.

All this time, Freda sat with white face and tightly closed lips striving to conceal the agitation of her mind. In a vague kind of way she recognised that her aunt's remarks were framed for her benefit, but she failed to realise in the slightest degree the baseness of the elder woman's conduct.

Presently Mrs. Colthrop continued musingly. "Ah, Courtney, my boy, just so. Fresh ties, new interests; the poor old mother must content herself with the second place now. But it is the way of the world, and one must not complain, especially in this case, where one hardly loses a son, and secures a charming daughter in addition. Still, it will be rather lonely, Freda, when you and Courtney are both gone, for I presume, I shall not keep you long now; at least it will not be Mr. Vicary's fault if I do."

Freda felt a large lump rise in her throat, and it was with difficulty she made answer.

"Mr. Vicary is nothing to me, aunt, and never will be more than a friend, whose kindness I appreciate. Please do not couple my name with his in the future."

"Ah, child, child!" with an air of good-humoured remonstrance, "how strange it is that the persons most nearly interested are oftentimes the last to realise the truth. Take Courtney for example; I have heard him use almost those identical words in regard to Helen, and yet he never deceived me. I saw it long ago, and now," tapping the open letter significantly, "comes the confirmation. It will be exactly the same with you, my dear, and I shall not fail to remind you of my prophecy on the day when Fred Vicary leads you to the altar."

Freda made no reply. She was weary and sick at heart, and longed to bury her grief and misery in the privacy of her own room.

Presently her aunt spoke again,—

"I am going to answer Courtney's letter," she said, at the same time rising from the table, "shall I add your congratulations to mine?"

Poor Freda! The question cut her like a knife, though even now she was unconscious of the agony which awaited her in the near future.

Forcing back her emotion she answered quietly, "If you mean that my cousin has asked Lady Helen Faudell to be his wife, and that she has accepted his proposal, then of course I congratulate him, and hope that he will be happy."

Mrs. Colthrop was a clever woman, and rarely took up a position from which there was no escape; so now she did not commit herself definitely.

"Well," she said musingly, and with an air of keeping something back, "perhaps it would be scarcely correct to say that everything is actually settled, though, naturally, I cannot say what has happened since this letter was written. But then Courtney is so reserved, that a hint from him conveys more information than a bushel of words from most people. But you are not well this morning; if I were you I would take a brisk walk in the park."

Left to herself, Freda put on her hat and cloak and followed her aunt's suggestion.

She was ill and miserable, she felt harassed, her head ached, and her brain was dizzy, she scarcely knew what she did.

For the time of year the day was bright and fair, and the trees in Briancourt Park still retained a certain matured beauty, but the girl noted nothing.

She wandered aimlessly along, sometimes even retracing her steps, knowing nothing, caring for nothing; conscious only of that one terrible refrain, which seemed to ring in her ears.

"Courtney is untrue, his profession of love a lie; he is going to marry Helen Faudell. Poor simple little fool, how easily he deceived you!"

Stung to madness she cried aloud, as though to some invisible tormentor,—

"It is false; I will stake my life on Courtney's honour. There is, there must be some terrible mistake. Oh, my darling!" she sobbed passionately, "it cannot be. If this is so, then indeed is faith dead on the earth. But I will be true to my trust. And yet how can I?"

She threw herself distractedly at the foot of a giant oak and sobbed afresh.

As yet she did not feel the misery of her own ruined life; that was to come; all her sorrow, all her grief was caused by the shattering of her ruined idol. Courtney false! Courtney faithless! she shrank in loathing from the thought, and hated herself for being capable of harbouring such a base suggestion.

And yet! ah, had not men of apparently spotless reputation played such a part! Had she not read, nay, was it not within her own personal knowledge that such things had happened?

She raised herself wearily and stood up; she must not abandon herself utterly to grief. She would hope against hope until the end.

With her beautiful face all stained with tears, she crept back to the house, and locked herself into her room, where she remained until luncheon.

Fortunately the house was empty save for her-

self and her aunt, and after luncheon Mrs. Colthrop dressed to go out.

"I am going to call at Rystone Mount," she said, graciously, "and shall probably bring Mrs. Rystone with me on my return, I trust your head will be better this evening."

Poor Freda! It was fated that many evenings were to elapse before her head was better, and that one in particular was destined to be the blackest evening in her existence.

It happened in this wise. Mrs. Colthrop not having returned, the girl dressed for dinner, putting on a simple white frock, and stole quietly down into the drawing-room.

At one end of the apartment, partially concealed by a large screen was a couch, and here, feeling too miserable to ring for lights, she lay down.

The darkness suited her, it accorded with her morbid imagination, and so for some time she remained alone, only half conscious of her position.

Presently the door opened and she heard voices, but before she could rise she heard her own name mentioned, and she preserved a strict silence.

Mrs. Colthrop was speaking, and the words were borne with a cruel distinctness to the stricken girl.

"Yes, no one knows at present besides yourself and Freda. I thought it best to tell her immediately, because I fancy she is already half in love with her cousin. Indeed, between ourselves, I fancy Courtney has not behaved altogether well to her, from the tone of his letter it appears that he has encouraged her evident liking for him, and even went so far as to commit himself by a proposal. I may be wrong, I trust I am, for the girl's sake, but he hints at having made a great mistake, and begs me to break the news gently. She asked me this morning if it were all settled, and really I had not the heart to tell her the truth, so I evaded it. But she is young and will soon forget him; indeed I should say that this would prove a capital opportunity for your friend Vicary—caught in the rebound you know. No, thank you Roberts," to the servant who had tapped at the door, "you need not bring lights for a few moments, we are going upstairs."

Adeline Colthrop did not think it necessary to inform her friend that she had caught sight of a shimmer of white at the further end of the room, and that her speech had been framed for the especial benefit of an unseen hearer, though she was not greatly surprised when later on a servant brought a message from Freda bringing her excuses for her non-appearance at dinner.

In the darkness Freda had crept to her room and flung herself on the bed. It was true then! The cruel story was true; there was no longer room for doubt. Courtney had not behaved well to her; he had made a great mistake, but had discovered his error in time. He was even sorry for her, and wished that she should not suffer. Well, at least she could suffer and make no sign, though it would probably kill her.

For hours she lay stunned and paralysed by the blow, and at length in the early morning hours she undressed and crept wearily into bed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE evening of the second day after Freda's aunt had given her confidence to Mrs. Rystone, Fred Vicary stood in his bedroom at Temple Grange, Yorkshire, with a sealed letter in his hand.

He had been invited down to his friend Pridemore's for a few days' shooting, and had just returned from a long day's sport. There was yet ample time to dress for dinner, so he did not hurry, but remained staring at the address on the envelope.

"Queer!" he exclaimed, "why should Mrs. Rystone write to me?" And then his heart gave a sudden bound as he suddenly remembered how close Rystone Mount was to Briancourt. He tore the envelope hastily and took out the letter.

As he had imagined, it was from Mrs. Rystone, and the contents evidently impressed him for he

read the communication two or three times before he laid it down.

"If only it could be true!" he cried. "By Jove, I'll go in the morning, whether or no; a fellow can but try!" And as the first bell rang, he rapidly proceeded to change his dress.

"I'm awfully sorry, Prideaux," he said that night to his host, as they sat in the smoking-room after the others had departed to bed; "but I must get you to lend me the dog-cart in the morning. I am obliged to return to town."

"Nothing serious, I trust!"

"No, I think not, still I am obliged to go. I may come back in a day or two, if you will have me?"

The other laughed.

"Always welcome at the Temple, Fred, whenever you choose to come. You had better leave your guns and things, they will not be wanted in London. Hudson shall drive you to the station in the morning. Shall you require to start early?"

"No, the 10.50 will suit me admirably. I find it changes at—; no, I don't mean that; it runs straight to Peterboro' without a stop, and only stays for a few minutes at one or two stations beyond that."

Prideaux looked at the speaker with a meaning smile, the slip had not passed undetected.

"Ah, just so, my boy!" he said; "well, I wish you success whatever may be the object of your journey. And now, as you have finished your cigar we will retire to the upper regions; there is a long tramp awaiting me in the morning."

The two men separated at Fred's chamber, and as his host passed into his own bedroom he muttered,—

"I wonder what there is in the wind now; one thing is very certain, he has no intention of visiting town. Well, he's a good fellow, I hope he has nothing serious to trouble him."

Meanwhile Fred had undressed and got into bed, though it was a considerable time before his excitement would allow him to sleep, and when finally he closed his eyes in slumber, his dreams were of Freda—dainty, charming little Freda, whom he was going to ask to be his wife.

The first rays of the morning sun roused him and, springing out of bed, he dressed himself hastily, though several hours must of necessity elapse before he could begin his momentous journey.

How strange it seemed as he watched the men after an early breakfast, fling out through the hall door, gun in hand, intent upon slaughter. Yesterday, he too, made one of the joyous throng, and his thoughts were only of the wonderful "bag" he would make. Now it did not interest him in the slightest, ardent sportsman though he was, and cheerfully bidding the last man goodbye, he went back to his room with a light heart and finished packing his things.

Mrs. Prideaux, his host's mother, met him in the hall as he came down.

"I am so sorry you have to leave us," she said with sincerity holding out her hand, which he took and held for a moment; "how tiresome this business is that you cannot have even a few days' holiday in peace," and he felt almost inclined to laugh as he agreed with her.

Hudson thought the gentleman must suddenly have come into a fortune, as he fingered the coin which Fred slipped into his hand at the station, and the gentleman whom Fred met in the train declared, when they arrived at Peterboro, that he had never had a jollier companion in his life.

It really was a pleasant journey, right away to the nearest station to Rystone Mount, and even when he discovered that he would be compelled to walk the other five miles the young man did not think to grumble.

He stepped out briskly, his handsome face lit up with a genial smile, for he was thinking of Freda with her bonny winsome ways, and his heart was buoyed up with hope, that mighty yet deceptive counterfeiter of the human race.

Mrs. Rystone's reception of him at the Mount was hearty and full of promise. "There is just time to dress for dinner," she said, "I scarcely expected you until the morning, or I would have

sent a conveyance. However your room is ready, yes! the old room, the servant will take your luggage. Oh, how stupid of me, of course it is at the station; well, never mind, there is no one but George and myself; he is dressing."

Fred laughed.

"That's right," he remarked, "I am glad you are alone, I will just take off a little of this dirt—the roads are very dusty—and be with you."

It was not until after dinner that the all-important subject was broached, and then Mr. Rystone laughingly suggested that Fred and Mrs. Rystone should adjourn to the drawing-room, while he went and smoked a cigar.

"Nonsense!" answered Fred, "the matter is no secret, only I wish to know everything Mrs. Rystone can tell me."

"Which is little more than I wrote in my letter," replied that lady as they passed into the drawing-room, "and even that, perhaps, I ought to have kept secret."

"Not so, my dear friend!" earnestly, "you have done me a great service, for which I can never thank you sufficiently, even if my mission fails."

"I would not be too precipitate," suggested the young man's hostess, "that is," smilingly, "if you can restrain your feelings."

"But you are quite certain there is no tie between her and Courtney! For my own part I thought the affair was quite settled."

"My information comes from Mrs. Colthrop herself; whatever may have been, there can be nothing now, since Courtney is engaged to Lady Helen Fauntell."

"And you think I have a chance of success!"

"Ah! that is more than I dare venture upon; I can only tell you, Freda is free, the rest you must discover for yourself. I will give you the opportunity. I will ask them to dine here to-morrow; after that you can call at Briancourt; Freda is generally to be found in the grounds."

The young man expressed his thanks, and the subject dropped for the night, though Fred could scarcely subdue his impatience to put his fate to the test, an impatience which became more and more intense during the following day.

Once in the course of the morning he suggested that in company with Mr. Rystone he should walk over to Briancourt, but his hostess met the proposition with a firm negative.

"No, my dear boy," she said, "trust to my advice, such a course will be suicidal. Williams has already taken a note from me to Mrs. Colthrop, and they are almost certain to come this evening. Then you will meet Freda in a casual manner, and be able to feel your way. To rush over now would be to show her that you had heard of Courtney's engagement, and that would stiffen her pride."

The young man acknowledged the wisdom of this reasoning and reluctantly acquiesced, though the day appeared to him a perfect cycle of ages, and he thought the evening would never come.

How would she greet him! Would she be pleased to see him? What would she say? He asked himself these and a hundred similar questions, but his answers were far removed from the actual reality.

It was really very prosaic after all. A slight pressure of the dainty hand, and then in response to his welcome,—

"Good evening, Mr. Vicary, this is rather a surprise, I had thought that you were in Yorkshire."

Somewhat the dinner was not a success. Mr. Rystone, as usual, said nothing; the elder ladies tried ineffectually to enliven matters, Fred was awkward and distrustful, and Freda was like a piece of exquisite mechanism which had not been wound up.

The young man could not divert his gaze from her, she looked so strange. She was as pretty as ever, but in such a different way. The light had gone from her eyes, the colour from her cheeks, there were no merry dancing smiles hovering round the corners of her lips; she seemed to him to have changed suddenly from a laughing light-hearted girl into a woman.

When anyone addressed her specially, she answered generally in a monosyllable, but she

made no effort to keep up the conversation. In the drawing-room Mrs. Rystone begged for a song, and the girl seated herself at the piano without a protest.

But though she sang and played faultlessly as far as technique was concerned, there was no music in her notes, and Fred detected the difference in a moment.

"She is very unhappy," he said to himself later, when Mrs. Colthrop had carried her niece back to Briancourt; "could she have loved him, I wonder! Is she grieving, because he is lost to her? Surely Courtney has not led her to believe he loved her, and then cast her aside for a more wealthy bride."

His face grew hot and flushed, and his eyes flamed with anger at the thought, for Freda was to him more than a mere woman. He loved her so devotedly that the mere idea of her having been caused to suffer made his blood boil.

Mrs. Rystone watched him narrowly, and guessed something of the tumult of passions which surged in his breast, but she made no comment save to echo his statement that Freda looked very ill. With the knowledge she had gained from Mrs. Colthrop, the change did not surprise her, and she pitied the girl from her heart, at the same time condemning Courtney's infamous conduct as heartily as Fred himself would have done had he known the truth.

Still she did not deem it wise to kindle the young man's anger against her friend's son, and this she would most assuredly do, by revealing fully the purport of Mrs. Colthrop's communication.

On that point therefore she preserved a discreet silence, and endeavoured, not without a fair share of success, to divert her guest's attention from the anxiety which was preying upon his mind.

When she was leaving the room for the night however, he said, abruptly,—

"I must go to Briancourt in the morning; I cannot bear this suspense, and the very fact of the poor girl's grief only makes me long the more that I had the right to comfort her."

Mrs. Rystone gave him a sympathetic smile.

"I have not the heart to dissuade you," she said, as he pressed her hand, "though I think it would be better to postpone all action for a day or two longer."

He shook his head sadly and turned away. What he had seen that night caused his whole soul to cry out in sympathy for the sorrowing girl, whom he loved so well.

CHAPTER V.

The morning after the dinner at Rystone Mount, Freda sought her room after breakfast for she dreaded a continuation of her aunt's covert sneers and insinuations. She was in a state of thorough and intense misery.

Even now, the ruin of her own life remained a secondary consideration. The root of her mental suffering lay in the thought of Courtney's dishonour. Her love was of so true a type that she would gladly have sacrificed her happiness to his.

Had he told her honestly that his affection had waned, and that he loved another, she would have set him free without a moment's hesitation, and worn a smiling face in spite of her sorrow—but this! this was so cruel, so unmanly so totally unlike the conduct of her ideal lover that she was hopelessly crushed by it.

The meeting with Fred Vicary had been productive of good in one respect, it had awakened her to a sense of her real position. Just as first she failed to grasp the meaning of his appearance, but in the silent watches of the night when her tortured spirit kept her from sleeping its true significance flashed into her mind, and she felt her face flush.

The story of Courtney's defection had already been noised abroad, and Fred Vicary's visit to Rystone Mount was its first result. She had become an object of scorn to her enemies, and of pity to those who loved her.

This she well knew would be intolerable;

even as she sat alone her cheeks reddened with shame. She must go away, that was imperative, but whither? Anxiously she ran over the list of her acquaintances, and her eyes brightened as she remembered Mrs. Carstairs.

"Yes!" she mused, "that would suit admirably. I believe she is my true friend, and with her I shall be far removed from those who know me. Later on, she will procure me a situation where I shall be enabled to earn my own living."

The idea of escape appeared to infuse new life into her. She opened her writing-desk, and penned a letter, which, while it did not enter into details, still revealed sufficient to show that the writer was in great distress, and yearning for the consolation of a genuine friend.

Another task awaited her now; one which caused the cruel wound to open afresh, and brought bitter tears to the sorrow-laden eyes. From the secret drawer at the back of her desk she drew forth a scanty stock of treasured trifles, absolutely without value intrinsically, but representing all that was best and brightest and happiest in that fair young life.

A photograph, a faded letter or two carefully secured with a band of silk ribbon, a few pressed flowers; innocent mementoes of an innocent life. Almost reverently she placed them together, and then with trembling fingers she wrote on a slip of paper, "Farewell for ever, Freda."

That was all. No cry of despair, no term of reproach, for she was not used to heroics. He would understand, and that would be sufficient.

Brave-hearted Freda! her misery was great, but her courage greater still.

The letter she would post at once with her own hands; the packet she would reserve until she had received a reply from Mrs. Carstairs.

Placing the letter in her pocket, she locked Courtney's package away in the desk, and proceeded to dress.

Not wishing to place her note to Mrs. Carstairs in the house bag, she resolved to walk along the road in the direction of Rystone Mount, where she knew she would meet the village postman returning from his morning round.

In the hall she encountered her aunt who exclaimed cheerfully,—

"Going for a walk, child! That is right, it is a glorious morning, and a breath of fresh air will do you good; I am afraid our late round of gaiety was too much for you. By the way do not be late for luncheon, I rather expect Mr. Vicary will call this morning, and it will be a pity if you are not back. I cannot entertain him by myself."

This was a trial which inevitably though it was, Freda had not calculated upon having to face so soon, and for once she felt grateful for her aunt's cheer; it put her on her guard.

She would lose no time in depositing her letter with the postman, and then, instead of returning to Briancourt by the public road she would enter the grounds by the private gate.

In this, however, she reckoned without Fred, who came in sight just as the postman having taken Freda's letter, was driving on.

She could not avoid him; he was scarcely a dozen yards away, though she would gladly have done so, had it been possible.

"Good-morning, Miss Denbigh," he said, raising his hat, "are you bound to Rystone?"

"I think not; my aunt expects me back early for luncheon."

He had taken his place by her side quite naturally, and as she looked at him she felt deeply grieved, for she knew instinctively why he had sought her.

She had always thought him handsome, but on this particular morning he was pre-eminently so.

The excitement had lent an added colour to his cheeks, and his eyes sparkled with the reflection of his great love.

For some distance they proceeded in silence, neither caring to speak, then Freda said, nervously,—

"Is not your visit to the Mount rather unexpected. I understood you were in Yorkshire, slaughtering the poor birds."

"Yes!" he answered, and she noticed his hesitation, "I had a day or two with Pidgeaux, but the fact is I got tired and resolved to avail myself of Mrs. Rystone's invitation; you know I have a standing invitation at the Mount."

It was a very lame excuse, haltingly made, and they both recognised its hollowness.

Her eyes flashed angrily; the truth was so very plain.

Courtney had discarded her; she had amused him for a time, and now he had lost his interest.

She had been useful as a plaything, but now he was going to be married, and it was time to put his toys on one side.

Mrs. Rystone knew this—his mother had told her, and she in turn had conveyed the information to Fred.

This man was aware of her shame—this man who walked by her side, with a pleasant smile on his face, and it was his knowledge that had brought him to her.

And he loved her, had loved her always.

He had waited patiently until now, because he knew she loved her cousin; this was his first opportunity to declare his passion, and he had lost no time.

A sudden rush of pity filled her soul; she did not mean to speak, but the words came in spite of herself, and when they were spoken, each tacitly accepted them as a recognition that the situation was understood by both.

"Do you know, Mr. Vicary," she said, softly, "I think you are very good, I often wish I had had a brother like you."

"I am glad that I am not your brother Miss Denbigh," he answered, "can you guess why?"

Yes, the reason was apparent; one glance into his lovely eyes would have been amply sufficient, but she did not look, and he did not wait for a reply.

"Freda," he continued, passionately, "need I tell you why I am staying at the Mount? Need I put my purpose into words? I have waited a long time, darling, for this day, and now I must speak."

"Do you not know, have you not known for years what you are to me—that you are the pearl of great price to obtain which I would gladly sacrifice everything. I am rich, but with you I would embrace poverty. I am young and strong but to hear you say 'I love you,' to feel the soft pressure of your hand, to watch the love-light in your sweet face, I would barter youth and strength. Freda, darling, love you! Give me your love and I have nothing else to wish for. Darling, you are listening to the pleading of a strong man. Other women there are in the world, but to me they are nothing. There may be some as beautiful, though none can ever be so fair to me, but I do not love you for your beauty. I love you because you are good and pure and innocent; because of your kindly heart, and your sweet winning ways. Freda, do I love in vain? Do not fear, darling, that you will hurt me. If you cannot love me, I must submit, and I will go quietly away. But oh, child, child, ponder well. My heart hungers for you; do not send me empty away, if you can give me one morsel of hope."

The tears streamed down the girl's face as he ended his appeal, and she could not look at him for sobbing. For the moment she yearned passionately to be able to take his hand in hers, and whisper,—

"Fred, I love you. I will be your wife!"

But it was impossible, and she knew it. Deep down in her heart was the old love, crushed and bruised and cruelly wounded, but not dead. In spite of all it was Courtney she loved still, and she could not give her hand to one man while her heart cried passionately for another.

And yet he was so good, so kind and true, so loyal and brave hearted, and he would suffer as she was suffering. She knew he had spoken truly, that it was no mere figure of speech he employed when he described her as the one woman in the world for him.

"Freda," he whispered, presently, "have you forgotten? I am waiting for your answer. Give it me darling, do not keep me in suspense, I

know you do not wish to pain me, but your silence, dear, is only a cruel kindness."

The girl's frame shook with the violence of her emotion.

"Oh!" she moaned, "I have dreaded this; it is all so sad, so pitiful; but I cannot help myself, you would not have me tell you an untruth?"

"No, dear," he said soothingly, "but I have no fear of that; my little Freda could do nothing dishonourable. Be calm, darling; look into my face and tell me if you love me!"

"I cannot," she said passionately. "I would try, for I know you are brave and true and loyal hearted; but it is useless. I do not love you, Mr. Vicary; if I did, I would gladly answer you, but I cannot, it is beyond my power. Oh, my dear friend, I would have spared you this if I could."

He kissed the tear-stained face carelessly, as an elder brother might have done, and took one little gloved hand in his.

"Do not grieve, Freda," he said, "I am strong. I will set myself resolutely to pluck out this passion from my breast. It will take long, and cost me many a bitter pang, but I shall succeed, and then I shall learn to look upon you as some sweet sister. Shall it be so, little one?"

She looked at him gratefully through her tears. "When that day comes," she said "no sister will rejoice in the possession of a more noble-hearted brother."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it reverently; then, with a last, long pressure, he turned away and walked sorrowfully in the direction of the Mount.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Freda returned to Briancourt her aunt called her into the drawing-room.

"Good gracious, child!" she exclaimed, "what is the matter? You are a perfect fright, your eyes are red as if you had been crying."

Freda sat down wearily.

"You must excuse me," she murmured, "I am not well, my nerves are unstrung."

"Well, for goodness sake, go and bathe your eyes. It is nearly luncheon time, now; Mr. Vicary may be here at any moment."

The girl was not accustomed to weigh her words. Her life had always been so open and innocent that she had never known the necessity of concealing anything, so now she said, frankly,—

"You need have no fear, Mr. Vicary will not come to luncheon."

Her aunt's question promptly and harshly put, revealed to her how foolishly she had acted in making the remark.

"Have you met him?"

"Yes," she answered, slowly, and with evident reluctance.

"And quarrelled with him?"

She stood up and looked her aunt steadily in the face.

"No," she replied with a simple dignity, "we are too firm friends to quarrel."

Mrs. Colthrop watched her as she left the apartment, and mentally exclaimed,—

"What a horrid nuisance! He has proposed, and been rejected; she is still hankering after Courtney, and this is gratitude! This is the result of my generosity. But the game is not won yet, young lady, and if you beat Adeline Colthrop you are much more clever than I give you credit for being."

Meanwhile, Fred, instead of returning straight to the Mount, had wandered away into the country where he could be alone. The rejection of his offer did not come altogether as a surprise, but it made him very miserable, none the less; the more so as he could not hide from himself the fact of Freda's unhappiness.

"Poor little girl," he said pityingly, "I wish I knew the truth concerning her and Courtney. That she still loves him is plain; what an idiot he must be to surrender a prize like that for the sake of Helen Faudell!"

Mrs. Rystone felt no surprise when Fred failed to put in an appearance at luncheon, as she concluded he was staying at Briancourt; but a glance

at his face in the evening revealed to her what had happened.

"Yes," he said, gloomily, in response to the question in her eyes, "it is all over, she has refused me. It is rather fortunate I left my guns at Pridesaux's, since I shall still be in time for a day or two's shooting. I am afraid the birds will have cause to regret Freda's decision."

He tried to conceal the bitterness of his grief by an affected jocularity, but his hostess was an experienced woman of the world, and the attempt did not deceive her.

She made no pretence of condoling with him; she knew that the struggle going on in his breast must be fought out alone and unassisted.

Neither did she try to alter his intention of returning into Yorkshire; in fact, she considered it the wisest policy he could adopt, and said so.

"Of course we should be glad of your society," she told him, "but Rystone is very quiet, and you require life and activity. Besides, under the circumstances, it will be better that you and Freda should not meet for a time."

"I shall go by the first train in the morning," he announced, "and if you will allow Williams to take my luggage to-night, I shall walk to the station."

In this manner it was arranged, and the next day, long before Mrs. Rystone descended to her late breakfast, Freda's rejected suitor was being swiftly borne on his journey.

Fortunately for the success of Freda's design, the morning after Freda's departure Mrs. Colthrop did not come down to breakfast, and it devolved upon her niece to open the post-bag. There were two or three letters for her aunt and one for herself which she carried off to the privacy of her own room.

It was a reply from Mrs. Carstairs, begging the girl to come to Dublin immediately, and assuring her of a hearty welcome.

Freda's face brightened as she read it, and she instantly set about making the necessary preparations.

So sure had she been of the nature of her friend's answer, that her course was already mapped out, and the services of the friendly postman put into requisition.

By catching the first train in the morning she would reach Bristol in time to cross by the Dublin boat; and, though the prospect of the journey rather frightened her, the relief of escaping from her aunt and Courtney overcame the dread.

When Mrs. Colthrop entered the breakfast-room the next morning and found Freda's place empty, she waited a few moments and then rang the bell for the servant.

"Go to Miss Denbigh's room," she said, "and ask if she is not well; I do not remember having heard any signs of movement when I passed the door."

The maid promptly withdrew, but reappeared in a few minutes with a white scared face.

"If you please, ma'am," she gasped, "Miss Denbigh is not in her room, and her small travelling trunk has been taken from its place."

Mrs. Colthrop's face betrayed no sign of her astonishment; and bidding the girl to refrain from gossip, she proceeded leisurely to her niece's chamber.

A rapid glance satisfied her that the bed had been slept in, and also that a portion of Freda's wardrobe had disappeared; then she caught sight of a letter lying on the dressing-table, and she picked it up.

Under any circumstances she would probably have found little scruple in opening it, but it was addressed to herself and she recognised her niece's handwriting.

The note was very brief, it made no allusion to Courtney, and contained no reproach to Mrs. Colthrop. The girl took all the blame upon herself and after thanking her aunt for her many kindnesses, concluded with the statement that she had gone on a visit to a dear friend.

Placing the note in her pocket, Mrs. Colthrop returned to the lower room and calmly began her meal without so much as a single speculation, though her busy brain was swiftly working a-

long to turn this unexpected event to her own advantage.

In some way she felt that this move of Freda's had put the girl in her power, but it was not until she accidentally overheard a casual remark of one of the servants that the shadowy ideas in her head developed into clear shape.

"The gentleman at the Mount," the maid exclaimed, in answer to some remark from her companion, "oh, he's gone, went away in a hurry. Williams told me, he thinks there must have been a row of some sort."

That was all—this bald statement, in the latter half of which there was not even a shadow of truth, but Mrs. Colthrop smiled softly to herself and went to her room rejoicing, for out of it she would forge a weapon that should crush Freda for ever.

The materials lay ready to her hand; she had not even to think, half an hour's easy writing, and the matter was finished.

At one stroke she would ruin this girl, this child of her dead sister, whom she had vowed to love and cherish, and not an atom of compunction or pity held her back.

Even now, perhaps, Courtney was already wavering and only restrained from proposing to Helen by a strained notion of honour. It was not likely that he could be thrown constantly into the society of so beautiful and accomplished a girl, without learning to regard her with affection.

And it was his mother's task to make his path clear. To do, her justice it must be said that Mrs. Colthrop was not naturally wicked.

She did not dislike Freda, and had no wish to do her an injury. On the contrary, had she accepted Fred Vicary's offer she was quite prepared to treat her with her usual lavish munificence; but she could not and would not permit her to marry Courtney, and spoil what she was pleased to consider his prospect.

From her point of view it was doubtless better that Courtney should marry Lady Helen Faudell, who had wealth, rank, influence, and a social position which would be to him of the utmost assistance.

And if Freda chose to constitute herself an obstacle to this marriage she must be sacrificed. That was a clear business-like view of the situation, divested of all romance and sentiment.

It would be unpleasant, doubtless, for Freda; but it was unpleasant also for her, Mrs. Colthrop, who had to act as the sacrificial priest. Still her duty was clear. Courtney must at all costs be saved from the results of this mad infatuation, and she could not afford to be particular as to the means.

What those means were a perusal of her letter to Courtney will show.

"MY DEAR COURTNEY," she wrote, "it is my unpleasant duty to acquaint you with a very sad and distressing event—your cousin Freda has left my roof."

"It is impossible to give you details as my own stock of information is extremely meagre. However, I will tell you what I can, and you must draw your own conclusions, as I regret to say I have been compelled to draw mine."

"For some time past the girl has been very odd and strange in her behaviour, so odd, indeed, that I have taxed her more than once of having some secret trouble. This, however, she has always denied."

"On Tuesday last we received a note from the Rystones, asking us to dine that evening at the Mount. Personally, I should have declined as I was not well; but Freda seemed so bent upon going that finally I consented."

"Imagine my surprise when I found Mr. Vicary a guest at the Mount. Of course I made no remark though I noticed that the meeting between him and Freda was exceedingly peculiar."

"The next morning she met him privately. This I know, as I taxed her with it, and she confessed."

"She had been weeping, and was evidently in a state of great agitation. From that time I know nothing until this morning when I discovered Freda's flight, and also learned that Mr. Vicary had abruptly quitted the Mount."

"In her letter to me—which I enclose—Freda

explicitly states that I am not to blame, and that she has gone to stay with a dear friend."

"Mind, all this may be merely a string of curious coincidences, and my own personal judgment of your cousin may be both a wrong and harsh one—I trust it will prove so. Do not mention the circumstance to your uncle or to the Faudells as the child may have been guilty of simply a foolish freak; and, in any case, you and I are bound to shield her as far as we can."

"When you write tell me what you think, as you know how highly I value your opinion. Of course I am doing all I can to trace her without exciting suspicion, though publicly, I have let it be known that she has gone on a visit to some friends."

"Give my regards to your uncle and the Faudells, and believe me,

"Ever your affectionate mother,

"ADELINE."

This she directed to Courtney Colthrop, Esquire, Hôtel des Anglais, Montone; and placed in the post-bag with a sigh of satisfaction.

CHAPTER VII.

"HERE my boy I a letter from the mater, and a packet addressed in an unknown handwriting—a lady's though, presumably. If it were your birthday I should say it must be a present from some fair admirer;" and General Colthrop laughed good-humouredly.

The two men—Courtney and his uncle—had just sat down to breakfast in their luxurious apartment at the Hôtel des Anglais, and the elder man was sorting the correspondence which the mail had just brought.

He was a short stout man with naturally a florid complexion, though at present his cheeks were rather pallid, owing to the effects of a recent illness.

Having passed the two missives to his nephew he turned to his own communications, and consequently failed to notice the ashen hue which over-spread the young man's face, as he recognised Freda's writing.

Placing the packet for the time at the side of his plate, he opened his mother's letter with feverish haste, and read its contents to the end.

Like Adeline, he had great powers of self-restraint, so that the General, glancing up presently with a merry twinkle, was totally unconscious of the tragedy being enacted in his presence.

"What is the programme for the day?" his uncle asked; and Courtney, speaking in an even tone replied, "I scarcely know; the morning I am afraid must be devoted to business."

"Ah, well, I will carry your regrets to *La belle Faudell*, but do not forget our excursion for this afternoon."

"No, I shall remember, but I must leave you now," and bidding the General take care of himself, he retreated to his room.

His mother's strange epistle had prepared him somewhat for Freda's curt note of farewell; but as he undid the tiny package and exposed its contents his heart seemed to stand still with apprehension. Was he mad or dreaming?

He took out his mother's letter and read it through afresh, and then he gazed at Freda's note, as if by dint of staring the letters would come to life and tell him something more.

As has been stated, Mrs. Colthrop was an undoubtedly clever woman, but in this particular instance her zeal had outrun her discretion, and carried her forward too impetuously.

At first Courtney was absolutely dazed and stupefied; but as he began to grasp the story more clearly, a blind, unreasoning anger rose up in his breast against Fred.

Not for a single instant did he harbour one doubt of Freda's innocence. The falling of the very heavens themselves would not have persuaded him that she was otherwise than pure, and true, and virtuous, but there was evidently some mystery at the bottom of the affair, and he would solve it.

Had Mrs. Colthrop paused for consideration

she would not have trusted to her son's quiescence, but her strong passion had blinded her judgment and so it came about that the very letter which she fondly imagined would crush Freda, was the means of bringing Courtney to England.

He formed his plans rapidly. He would start for England that very day, and search high and low until he stood face to face with the man whose actions had somehow thrown a shadow over his darling's happiness.

He did not even wait for his uncle's return, but leaving a short note briefly explaining that he had been suddenly called away upon urgent business, he hurriedly packed a few things and proceeded to the station.

It was a miserable journey, and as he lay back in the corner of his carriage he wondered what would come of it. He hardly knew whether anger, grief, or sheer astonishment predominated in his mind, so inextricably confused did he feel.

Had his mother's letter been unaccompanied by Freda's contemptuous note, the situation, though still complicated, would not have preyed upon him so deeply.

It was the few cold scornful words she had pencilled, that cut him to the heart and made him wretched.

Presently the question forced itself upon him—were they words of scorn? Might they not have been written more in sorrow than in anger? Was it possible that during his absence she had discovered that her supposed love for him was merely the fanciful dream of an inexperienced girl? He remembered how partial she had always been to Fred, and his mother's insinuations became endowed with a new vigour.

How slowly the train seemed to crawl! Would he never reach the end of his journey? He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but the attempt was a mockery. His head ached, his brain was the receptacle for a thousand fresh ideas, all equally unsatisfactory.

"It is useless thinking," he exclaimed at length, "I get no nearer, I must wait."

When he reached London he went straight to Fred's rooms, and here he met with a further check.

"No, sir," the landlady said, "Mr. Vicary is not at home; he has been away for a holiday in the country somewhere, I believe, but he is coming back by the last train; will you leave a message?"

"Thank you, no; my business is important, I will call myself. What time do you expect him?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Thank you, I will return."

He went to an hotel and had lunch; then he wandered out into the deserted parks, wondering viciously if Fred would really come back that night.

When the clocks struck nine he retraced his steps, and asked the landlady to allow him to wait in Mr. Vicary's room.

"He will not object," he said "I am an old friend; probably you have heard him mention my name—I am Courtney Colthrop."

The worthy dame's face beamed with satisfaction.

"Yes, indeed, sir, I have heard him speak of you, and now I remember your features; you have been here before," and she drew back for him to pass.

A bright fire burned in the grate, and he took up his position in front of it and waited. Presently there came a rattle of wheels, a cab stopped at the door, and shortly afterwards Fred entered the room.

The situation was extremely dramatic. For some seconds the two men stood and faced each other, neither caring to speak. Courtney was quivering with suppressed passion, while the other, with the vision of Freda's tear-stained face before him, could scarcely conceal his contempt.

But the tension was too great, and at length Fred broke the silence.

"To what may I attribute this unexpected honour?" he asked stiffly, "I had no idea that I stood so high on the list of Mr. Colthrop's friends!"

"Where is my cousin? where is Freda Denbigh? Answer me that, you hypocrite!"

Fred strode forward to the angry man.

"You are mad, Colthrop," he cried, "you are beside yourself; what have I to do with Freda Denbigh?"

Courtney took his mother's letter from his pocket and handed it to him without a word.

Fred read it through, and a bitter smile played about his lips as he said contemptuously,—

"And you believed that! You who profess to love her, and whom she loves with all her soul. Upon my word you must be little better than an idiot. I went to Rystone, true, but that she knew of my intended visit is false. I went to ask her to be my wife, and I will tell you why. It was because your mother said you were tired of her. Do you understand? Your mother gave it out that you were engaged to Helen Faudell, and Freda was free to marry anyone as long as she did not marry you. Believing that, I asked her to be my wife, and she refused. Stricken with grief by your supposed treachery she still loved you. She was true to you then, she is true to you now. And you—upon my soul I wish you had stayed and married the heiress—you are not fit for a girl like Freda."

Courtney trembled all over; his face was white, his throat parched, he could barely speak.

"Spare me Fred," he said, "not for my own sake, I may deserve all your scorn and more—but—but, do you not see, you are denouncing a mother to her son."

Fred looked at him curiously.

"What do I care about a mother?" he cried, "I am thinking of Freda, my bonny, winsome Freda. Do you think you are the only man with a grief? What is your sorrow compared with mine? You will find her soon, and marry her and be happy. What will you care about the bitterness of my anguish? Do the tears that I shed affect you? When my heart cries out hungrily for the love which is lavished on you, will your bosom be sensible of my pain? What kind of love can this be, whose happiness cannot swallow up all other sentiments?"

Courtney did not answer, he was sick at heart, the revelation of his mother's treachery crushed him. She had sinned for his sake he knew, but that did not mitigate the blackness of her crime.

He still stood absorbed in his bitter reflections when his companion touched him on the arm, and said,—

"Need I tell you that your secret is safe with me? Besides you and me and your mother, no one need be the wiser, unless later on you choose to take Freda into your confidence."

Courtney pressed his hand gratefully, and thanked him.

"If I could find her and bring her back, all might yet be well," he said, "but where to search?"

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UNDER A CLOUD.

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CHAPTER XXII.

ON and on towards the great river with its restless tide, its mighty waters which had hidden so many secrets and buried so many sorrows, Olive Durant hardly knew why she sped onwards, or what she meant to do, her mind was in such a confused state she was almost incapable of thought, and she started as one waked from a terrible dream, when a frank, cheerful voice sounded in her ears.

"Miss Durant, is it possible?"

She looked up, still with that awful, dazed, bewildered expression in her beautiful eyes and recognized the doctor of the ship in which she returned from South Africa, and under whose care, as a convalescent, she had been specially placed by her father. A swift recollection came back to her of her first meeting with Mr. Ashton, and her father's tenderness and care for her. The tears welled up into those clear, dark eyes. The

awful tension on mind and brain were relaxed, Olive's reason was saved, perhaps, too, her life.

Robert Ashton was a man a little over thirty, and a clever doctor. He had only undertaken the duties of ship's surgeon for six months, while he was waiting for his father to be able to buy him a small practice. Of all the passengers he had met on the ocean line he had been most interested in Olive Durant. He had recognized her the moment he saw her tonight, but one glance had assured him there was something terrible the matter with her, and so he waited, unwilling to accost her suddenly in a crowd till, after he had followed her nearly a mile, an awful suspicion came to him of where her steps were wending, and for what end.

"Yes," said Olive, looking at him dreamily. "It is I. Is the Ocean Queen in dock or have you left her?"

"I left her in the spring and set up for myself in London. Miss Durant, forgive me, but you are looking very ill. As one of my late patients I can't let you wander about London by yourself; only tell me where you are going, and I will gladly escort you there."

He had turned down a side court, which at this hour of the evening was utterly deserted; every warehouse in it was closed. He and Olive were utterly alone.

"But I don't know," said the girl, with a pitiful, helpless sort of smile. "I had not made up my mind."

Mr. Ashton grew more and more alarmed: Was she in her right senses or had some terrible blow stunned her?

"Your father once commended you to my care," he said very gravely. "I am sure if he were alive," and he looked kindly at her black dress, "he would not like you to be wandering about alone in London at this hour. Come home with me and let my wife do what she can to make you comfortable for to-night."

"But she doesn't know me," said Olive, feebly, "and she may not like it."

"Yes, she knows you," said Mr. Ashton, speaking in a soothing tone as though to a sick child. "She was one of your fellow-passengers—Janet Ingleby."

A vision came to Olive of a poor little nursery governess who had had the sole charge of six children, and been responsible for their mother's ruin as well. Most people on board had pitied Miss Ingleby, and declared she was a treated little better than a white slave. It seemed her troubles were over now, and she was safe in the shelter of a good man's love. If asked, their fellow passengers would have declared with one voice that Miss Durant had far fairer prospects than poor little Janet Ingleby. Yet here was one a hopeless wanderer from home and friends while the other was a happy bride.

"Yes, you will come!" said Robert Ashton, seeing that Miss Durant was incapable of thought, "or Janet will never forgive me. She has often spoken of you and said how kind you were to her on board."

He hailed a passing omnibus and handed Olive in before she had time to object; but she felt too weak and miserably unstrung to raise any difficulties; it was an unutterable relief to her to have the decision of her next step taken out of her hands.

She knew very little of London. While staying at Penge Mrs. Wyndham had taken her niece to one or two "sights;" but of the great capital, as a whole Olive knew absolutely nothing, while, except Penge, she had never been in one of the suburbs, and had no idea of their relative social status. It seemed to her a long time before Mr. Ashton prepared to alight, and she did not in the least understand his remark.

"I don't suppose you have ever been so far East before, Miss Durant. My sisters declare we have gone beyond the reach of civilized people, but Janet and I are very happy here."

It was one of the poorer suburbs, but there was nothing squalid about it; perhaps the extreme poverty was confined to the slums. Olive Durant saw a broad, cheerful road, flanked on either side by shops and tall prim houses, approached by long front courts, the shops and houses being mixed in a kind of haphazard way,

as though the architect had very little method. Some distance further on the road grew very wide, indeed so wide that a good-sized church stood in the middle without at all inconveniencing the traffic. It was a very ugly church, and it certainly seemed very strangely placed. Probably it had been built long ago when there was nothing but fields and lanes round it. Now a narrow passage had been cut through the disused graveyard and carefully railed off so that the pedestrians who wanted to cross at that special point, need not walk all the way round the church.

There was a service of some kind going on, for Olive could hear the deep tones of the organ. Yet a continuous stream of women with market-baskets crossed the railed-off passage and the briskest of bargaining went on at the shops close by, so that the prayers of the few gathered in the old grey church must surely have been disturbed. Olive did not notice this at the time, but it all came back to her later as something seen in a dream.

Mr. Ashton lived in a pleasant looking street leading out of the high road; a large brass-plate on the gate announced that Messrs. Carr and Ashton were surgeons, &c., a red lamp gave further evidence of the fact. It was a small house, but Olive's guide looked at it with an air of great pride as he said,—

"My partner lives in the High-street, but I like a quieter part and here we can have a little garden."

Mr. Ashton opened the door with his latch key, and at the sound his wife came from her pretty sitting-room to meet them.

"How late you are, Bob, I got quite fidgetty. Oh," as she caught sight of Olive, "where did you find Miss Durant?"

"I met her in London," said Bob, with a glance his wife understood, "and I persuaded her to come and see you. I knew you would be proud to think the spare room had a guest at last."

"Of course I am," said Nettie, who had slipped one hand into poor weary Olive's. "Miss Durant looks very tired, perhaps she would like to rest a little before supper."

Olive followed her upstairs, it was such a pretty room even though it was in a house rented for thirty pounds a year in a cheap London suburb; there was a little white bed and over it hung a picture of Cape Town and Table Mountain, and opposite a photograph of the Ocean Queen.

It was too much for Olive, as she thought of all she had gone through since she saw Table Mountain, of all she had suffered since she left the steamer, she broke into a fit of bitter weeping.

Nettie stood by her, wondering, but with the tact some women have, she never asked a single question.

"I am so glad Bob found you, Miss Durant, and brought you home. It is such a pleasure to me to see anyone who was kind to me in my dark days."

"You are very good," said Olive. "I can't explain anything, my head goes round and round when I try to think, but please, please don't think I have done anything wicked. I can't tell you now, I feel so dazed, but I think I was very near an awful sin and Mr. Ashton saved me."

"And now you are tired to death," said the little woman, gently, "you must have a good night's rest and in the morning you will feel ever so much better. You shall tell us anything you like then, but, dear, be sure we shall have no unkind thought of you."

She helped her guest to bed with a kind of motherly tenderness, though she was really Olive's junior, then she brought her a little supper and a simple, composing draught the doctor had prepared. In a very little while Olive was sleeping peacefully as a little child and Mrs. Ashton went downstairs to her husband.

"Did she tell you anything, Nettie?"

"She begged me not to think her wicked, and the next moment she said she thought you had saved her from a terrible sin. Where did you find her, Bob?"

"I saw her first in Cheapside, and there was something about her which frightened me, she

seemed like a person walking in her sleep, and when she went on and on towards the river I made up my mind not to lose sight of her, the look in her eyes as she watched the water made me shudder."

"And yet she is more beautiful than ever, and in the old days, on board ship, I used to think she had the loveliest face I ever saw," said Nettie, earnestly.

"But it was never a happy face," replied Robert Ashton, gravely; "the first time I ever saw Miss Durant, I felt sure she had some secret trouble, indeed, her father's words implied it; he told me her illness had been brought on chiefly by worry and anxiety."

"And to think I used to fancy it was only poor people who had worries!"

"That's a mistake a good many of us make. I fancy I heard from someone that Mr. Durant died a week after his daughter left the colony, and she told me, herself, she had no friends in England. I expect she has had a sorrowful time of it, Nettie, and we must do our best to help her."

Olive Durant awoke the next morning refreshed and stronger, able to look her position in the face, and think of the future.

She did not regret her flight from High Cliff, knowing that Percy Fellowes loved her how could she have gone on meeting him from day to day, when she felt in her own heart but for her forcible bondage she could have given him the best love of her womanhood?

No; High Cliff was forbidden ground to her, but after all it might be possible to hide herself from Robert Lang without losing the life of a fugitive. Mr. and Mrs. Ashton were kind and faithful; if she told them she had an earnest reason for wishing not to meet anyone who had known her in South Africa or High Cliff, surely they would help her, and if Lang again discovered her whereabouts, why there was one means of escape open to her she had forgotten before; she might return to South Africa, not perhaps to Port Agnes but to Cape Town itself, or some other town in the colony where Lang, as an escaped convict, would not dare to follow her.

It would be a lonely life, blessed by no close friendships, no intimate ties, but at least there would be no shame in it, she would be free.

So when little Mrs. Ashton came in to see after her guest, she was so much relieved at the change in her appearance that she told her husband his professional skill would not be necessary for Miss Durant, and he might start on his morning round. Later on when Olive had come downstairs, Nettie said to her,—

"I want you to stay with us for a few days, dear, till you are able to make up your mind about your future plans."

"Mrs. Ashton," said Olive, sadly, "I want to tell you my story; not all of it, but enough to make you understand why I am in such terrible straits. You lived in Cape Town for two years. Did you ever hear of Vane Carlyon, the man whose trial for illicit diamond buying was the talk of the colony just before you returned to England?"

"I heard of him often," said Nettie, "in fact he visited at Mrs. Johnson's, she thought he would marry her sister."

"He was introduced to me, and, unknown to my father, I married him."

The happy wife relinquished her hold on Olive's hand. Nettie could not speak, words seemed helpless in such a trouble as this.

"Father thought I should be safe for seven years, and even after that he should succeed in hiding me from my husband. We were parted on our wedding day. I found soon Vane had deceived me terribly, not only about his character but about his faith; he was engaged to three other girls when he married me. Do you wonder, dear, I awoke from my infatuation! remember how terribly he tried me. I do not feel as if I were his wife at all, though I know I am in the eyes of the law."

"You poor child," said Nettie, feelingly. "Lang's escape from prison must have been an awful blow to you."

"It sent me nearly mad, and he came to the little village where I was living to try to extort money from me; do you wonder I came away?"

I felt so miserable, so utterly broken hearted, I think if your husband had not found me yesterday, I should have ended it all."

Nettie kissed her.

"Dear," she said tenderly, "it is a terrible sorrow, but try and bear it. No earthly power can force you to return to Vane Carlyon, *alias* Lang, and I don't see why your whole life should be blighted just by one mistake. He will never dare to claim you openly, if only you live quietly and make no friends you will be safe."

"Will you help me?"

"Of course I will," said Nettie, "so will Bob. I wonder now if you could be content to spend a few months in Bennington? I know such a nice woman who is trying to let apartments. This isn't a good neighbourhood for letting, and she has had her rooms empty a long while. Now if you would take them, Olive, Bob and I would be near at hand to protect you if—if Mr. Lang appeared, and in a crowded neighbourhood like this, people have far less time to be anxious about their neighbours so that you would be spared all the gossip that might arise in a small country town."

"I think," Olive positively smiled, "it would be very nice, and, Mrs. Ashton, you know I have plenty of money; perhaps I might find something to do for other people, so that my life wasn't quite a failure."

There were tears in her friend's eyes.

"I don't believe your life will ever be a failure, Olive. I remember when I saw you first on board ship. I thought it a pleasure just to look at you. Beauty like yours is a wonderful gift, dear, and you have another, that of making people like you. I don't believe you could be friendless long."

Two burning red spots came into Olive's white cheeks.

"I thought, perhaps, I ought to have no friends. Don't you understand, Mrs. Ashton. I am so young even now people might think I could—I mean I don't want anyone to fancy I am free to marry."

A kind of lump rose in Nettie Ashton's throat. It was all so unutterably sad—beautiful, loving, and with every gift to win a man's heart, yet for Olive Durant there must be no wedding-bells, no husband's love, no touch of children's clinging hands—for all time she must live alone—oh, the pity of it!

"I think," she said, slowly, "you would be safe here. In a poor neighbourhood like this there are very few gentlemen. I don't know half-a-dozen families in the place who are above the rank of small shopkeepers; living alone you would not be likely to meet any gentlemen."

"I think I understand," said Olive, thoughtfully, "one wouldn't want a chaperon in Bennington. There wouldn't be such a thing as visiting just a matter of course. People only go to see their friends. They haven't time to leave cards on newcomers."

"I don't think anyone in Bennington leaves cards," said Nettie, with a smile. "Bob's partner has a very nice wife; but as she has a dozen children she has not much time to visit. I have been to tea there once, and she confided to me she had not taken a meal out of her own house for six years."

Olive opened her eyes.

"Six years!"

"Dear," said Mrs. Ashton, gently, "you were brought up in a most hospitable Colonial town. Since you came to England you have entered society an heiress. You don't understand anything of lower middle-class life in England; with a large family and one servant Mrs. Carr has plenty to do at home. Naturally, meals are a serious matter. If she went out to tea, who would see that the twelve children had theirs?"

Olive did not continue the argument. Mrs. Ashton refused to take her to see the apartments that afternoon. She said her visitor must stay with them over Sunday, and that on Monday, if still in the same mind, she would introduce Olive to her humble *protégée*.

"Ah," said Bob, "it's a hard case, Mrs. Jordan's. I shall be very glad if you take her

rooms, Miss Durant, even if you only stay a few weeks."

"Is she a widow?" asked Olive, with some interest.

"Yes, she has been a widow for some years; but she had a brother an old bachelor who lodged with her, and with what he paid and what she earned by going out to people's houses as a dress-maker, she was pretty well to do. The brother was a traveller and often away for weeks at a time, and then sometimes she took in a lodger."

"Of course it was long before our time," put in Nettie; "but Mrs. Carr told us the story. About three years and a half ago a young man took Mrs. Jordan's lodgings, saying they were for himself and his wife. Bennington is an odd piece to choose for a honeymoon; but they had certainly been married the very day they came. They stayed about a fortnight, paid handsomely and left. Mrs. Jordan always quoted them as 'the best of lodgers,' and so when a year later Mrs. Cliff came again, this time alone, she made no demur about taking her in."

"And a baby was born in due course," said Mrs. Ashton; "but this time money did not seem so plentiful, and about a month after the child's birth the mother slipped out quietly one morning before Mrs. Jordan was stirring."

"Leaving the child on her hands," gasped Olive, who had not been in the least prepared for this development.

"Yes, she pinned a paper on to the cradle, promising to reclaim the little girl as soon as she could, and at any rate to send money for her support. That must be about two years and a half ago, but in the meanwhile nothing has been heard of Mrs. Cliff, and not a farthing has come for the baby's maintenance. Worst of all, Mrs. Jordan's brother was so angry that his sister would not send the little thing to the workhouse that he left the house and married a young woman, who has widened the breach and won't let him speak to poor Mrs. Jordan."

"And of course she can't go out to work because of the child," said Mr. Ashton. "She does what she can at home, but it's a hard struggle, and it will be a charity if you take the rooms."

When Olive saw the rooms they were rather a shock to her. With refined artistic tastes, a parlour furnished in green rep, with a crimson carpet and table cloth rather jarred on her, but she reflected a few pounds spent at some large furniture shop would soon effect a reformation, and as she cared very little what became of her it would be as well if her choice of an abode pleased some one, and apart from her pitiful story Mrs. Jordan seemed a quiet, respectable woman.

Not till the bargain was concluded did she see the child, a tiny girl, who seemed as if the troubles of her little life and her mother's desertion had somehow stamped her baby face with an expression of premature gravity and sadness. A rush of pity filled Olive's heart at the large, wistful blue eyes and the silky brown curls which testified to Mrs. Jordan's pride in her little charge.

"What is your name, dear?" asked Olive, taking the little hand in hers.

"Barbara," answered the wife, repeating the three syllables with wonderful distinctness, perhaps because it was an oft-taught lesson.

Was it the name which recalled to Olive Durant the friend who hovered between life and death at High Cliff Towers, or was it a wild fancy which made the helpless think the child's wistful face reminded her of Barbara Fellowes?

CHAPTER XXII.

SOMETHING like an electric shock passed through those who listened to that strange protest of the girl they all so dearly loved. As Barbara fell back unconscious, Dr. Harley signed to Sir George and Percy to leave the room, he felt they must wait to discuss the marvellous statement just made by what were perhaps dying lips, and the one chance for Barbara was now perfect quiet.

Sir George drew his son into the library, the

room where Percy first heard the story of the forged cheques. The old gentleman could not understand the change in his boy. To him the thought that Barbara was Lang's wife was full of bitter pain, but Percy looked like a man relieved from some deadly nightmare.

"Do you believe it?" asked the father, "or was that poor girl wandering?"

"I believe it firmly. I will prove it soon, please Heaven."

"And you are actually glad—glad that that scoundrel Lang is your brother-in-law?"

"Father," said Percy, in a grave, sad voice, "whether Lang is her husband or not he has wrecked Barbara's life for all time. If it can be proved he was a married man when he went through the form of wedding Olive Durant, that ceremony was invalid and Olive is free."

Sir George began to understand.

"I am a selfish old man, Percy; but I see it all now. Nothing in the world can restore Barbara's happiness, but—that other poor child's might yet be saved. If Barbara is Lang's wife Olive Durant can hold up her head and face the whole world, because his power over her is at an end."

"I want you to cast your memory back," said Percy. "I was so little at home in the last months of Lang's stay here. Was there any absence of Barbara's that could be utilized for the marriage?"

"She was not away much," said Sir George. "After Lang came here she never seemed to care to pay visits; though I, fool that I was, never suspected the cause. One thing I do remember, after he asked me for her, and I indignantly refused, she seemed to get into a low desponding state, and her mother sent her to the seaside to stay with an old schoolfellow. She was away then six weeks. Very soon after she came home the exposure came, and after that her long and terrible illness."

Percy started.

"I should have said the marriage was EARLIER," he said, gravely. "I expect Lang took care to secure Barbara before he spoke to you about it."

"Well, the year before we were in London for a month, and Barbara, tired of pleasuring, went to stay at some Sisterhood in a poor part of London; she said they wanted someone to help them with their Christmas treats; she was away a fortnight and came back in the best of spirits. I remember her mother told me hard work must have agreed with her."

"And you could fix the date?"

"Three years ago last January. I can give you the address of the Sisterhood. I fancy Barbara has kept in touch with them since; but, Percy, nothing must be done while your sister lies in this state."

"I think," said Percy, "if she is Lang's wife, that explains everything. She could not bring herself to denounce her husband, or she might have told Harley of the terrible hypnotic influence exerted over her. All her regret for injuring us, all her blank despair, her refusal ever to go into society like other people, it is all clear now. Poor girl! in fancy she saw herself scorned and disdained as the wife of a forger."

"I dare not pray for her life," said Sir George; "Heaven knows I love my poor girl, but when I think of all she has suffered, I dare not wish her to live to suffer more; only, my boy, for your sake, I hope, before the end, she may be able to tell us all."

Dr. Harley came downstairs. Barbara was conscious and was now dropping asleep; he thought her mind was clearer, but she must not be agitated on any subject at present.

The kindly doctor was a great comfort to both father and son; he understood the torture inaction must be to Percy, and yet could sympathise with Sir George's feeling that it was cruel to take any steps to prove the marriage while Barbara's life trembled in the balance.

"You must hunt up Mr. Morton, Percy; if he is Lang, and you threaten him with the police, depend upon it he will tell you the truth. So much can be done without any fear of betraying Barbara's secret."

The Vicar of High Cliff had been quite right;

the story of going to London was a blind, and Mr. Morton was quietly waiting at Darton until his sister could join him. This lady decided to wait until the lawyer's clerk arrived to pay her salary; she also intended to help herself to everything portable from Olive's treasures.

Mabel Jocelyn was a very sharp woman; she fully believed that their intended victim had escaped them, and it was doubtful if they got hold of her again. A life of hide and seek required money to make it comfortable, and so intended to take as much of money's worth as she could.

"After all," she told her brother when they met to discuss their plans, "being respectable is very dull work; if only we can get a nice little sum together, we'll go across the Channel and try our luck at the tables. It will be hard if between us we can't pick up a decent living. I should rather enjoy staying here to shock the Tollingtons, but I'm afraid I can't afford to be spiteful, so we'll just make tracks!"

It seemed to Robert Lang, humanly speaking, quite safe. Olive Durant had flown rather than face him, which surely meant she had not confided fully in anyone; while the hints she had dropped to her cousin Alice were not enough to harm him.

His deaf old landlady believed most fully in his virtues, and was deeply touched by his labours among the heathen, regarding him as a sort of lay missionary; there was not the least fear of her growing suspicious. And Darton generally had grown quite used to the presence of the great traveller; they were simple country folks. Besides, the disguise was a good one, and would have deceived even those who had known Robert Lang when he lived at High Cliff Towers as Sir George's secretary.

Percy went down to High Cliff Lodge on his way to the station; he carried with him a warm invitation to Alice Melville to become his mother's guest for the present, but Alice clung to the house where she had been so happy with her cousin. She had not given up the hope of Olive's return, so she sent a grateful message to Lady Fellowes, but declined the invitation.

Darton was quite a small place, and sufficiently near the Towers for Sir George's heir to be well-known there. Percy found not the least difficulty in tracing Mr. Morton. The post-office gave his address at once.

"He went to Rose Cottage to be quiet, sir; he couldn't stand the noise of the hotel. He's often away for a day or two at a time, but he makes Rose Cottage his headquarters. You can't mistake the house, sir; it's down by the river, and very lonely."

Percy's heart was full of anger against the man he sought. To Robert Lang he owed it seemed to him every trouble of his life. His father's embarrassments; his sister's illness; Olive's misery; he longed to see the man who had done so much harm richly rewarded, as he deserved, but he had no intention of taking the punishing on himself. He despised Lang so intensely he would have felt it a degradation even to touch him. He hardly knew what he expected of the interview beyond the clearing up all doubt respecting Barbara's marriage.

He had much ado to make the deaf landlady understand his errand but at last he accomplished it.

"Mr. Morton was out," she said promptly, "fishing—he often spent hours at it, and the gentleman would certainly find him in the long walk down by the river."

Percy hesitated just a moment. He would rather have seen Lang indoors. The tale he had to tell was one which would brook no listeners. Still, on the other hand, the riverside might be a lonely place, and at any rate he would not return home with his task undone.

He had walked some distance when a bead of the river suddenly brought him in sight of the angler. Well, Percy confessed the disguise was splendid, but for his conviction that this was Lang, he might have been deceived. There was something in the cool deliberate way in which the angler baited his hook which made Percy's blood boil. A forger, a thief, a bigamist, a black-mailer, he was all that, and yet he could sit there



THE SHOT WAS TRUE, PERCY FELLOWES FELL FORWARD ON THE GRASS.

as calmly as though the police were not in pursuit of him, and could give all his attention to trying to catch a few miserable fish, while through his crimes one woman's heart was slowly breaking, and another was a fugitive from home and friends.

The angler suddenly turned round and caught sight of the new-comer. By a desperate effort he kept his composure and went on fishing as though Percy's presence could have nothing to do with him.

Something in the young man's cold resolute face might have warned him of his danger, but he was so confident in his disguise he was ready to play out the farce to the bitter end.

"You scoundrel," cried Percy, hotly incensed at his indifference, "you have played your games once too often. Unless you satisfy me promptly as to some questions I have to ask you, the police shall be on your track to-night."

"On what cause?"

"On the grounds that you are an escaped convict, Robert Lang alias Vane Carlyon."

"Ah!" he had dropped his rod now and faced round to confront Percy, "what then?"

"Insolence will not avail you," thundered Mr. Fellowes. "My father will prosecute you for forgery, and—"

"If he does," said the other, speaking as quietly as though they had been discussing the weather, "I shall be at the trouble of explaining to the court that it is quite a family affair, and my esteemed father-in-law will hardly proceed to exposing the fact that his daughter is a convict's wife."

"You are a convict now."

"But I have maintained a delicate silence as to the past. I have kept my marriage with Miss Fellowes, of High Cliff Towers a profound secret."

Percy drew a breath of unutterable relief.

"Then you admit the marriage?"

"I am not an idiot," said Lang smoothly; "do you think, Mr. Fellowes, knowing the hatred you cherish for me I should have ventured near High

Cliff if I had not possessed a talisman to ward off your anger. You can only strike me through Barbara. The moment you denounce me I shall publish our marriage. The shame and despair which follow a convict's relations will then be Barbara's and her child's."

"The child's!" Percy fairly started, "do you mean to say—"

"I mean to say that I was married to your sister three years ago last January, in my own name of Robert Lang, at St. Benedict's Church, City; and that our child was born the January following, two months after I had vainly asked your father's permission to pay my addresses to Barbara."

"But where is it?"

"You must ask Barbara. You took good care to drive me out of England, I could hardly take an infant to the colonies."

"But you married in Africa," said Percy, angrily, "you committed bigamy."

"I did; but I gained very little by it. I was parted from my second wife on our wedding day, before I had time to gain a share of her father's fortune. She wouldn't have any scruples about handing me over to the law, she hates me like poison, but she has an almost morbid dread of public opinion, and does not want to be known as a convict's wife. If she heard of the little ceremony at St. Benedict's her course would be easy."

"You have deceived her, too; you have robbed my father through thick and thin, even while you were in Africa."

"I never robbed Sir George; the cheques you refer to were signed by your own sister."

"At your instigation?"

"Well, she couldn't see her husband starve. I always had a peculiar magnetic influence over Barbara, and may have used it for my own ends, but in the eyes of the law she committed the crime, not I."

"And she is dying," cried Percy passionately, "dying through your cruelty."

"Well," said Lang, slowly, "she had absurdly

morbid scruples. She took life too seriously all round, and, poor girl, she is quite a wreck of her old self; I don't think anyone could wish to prolong her life."

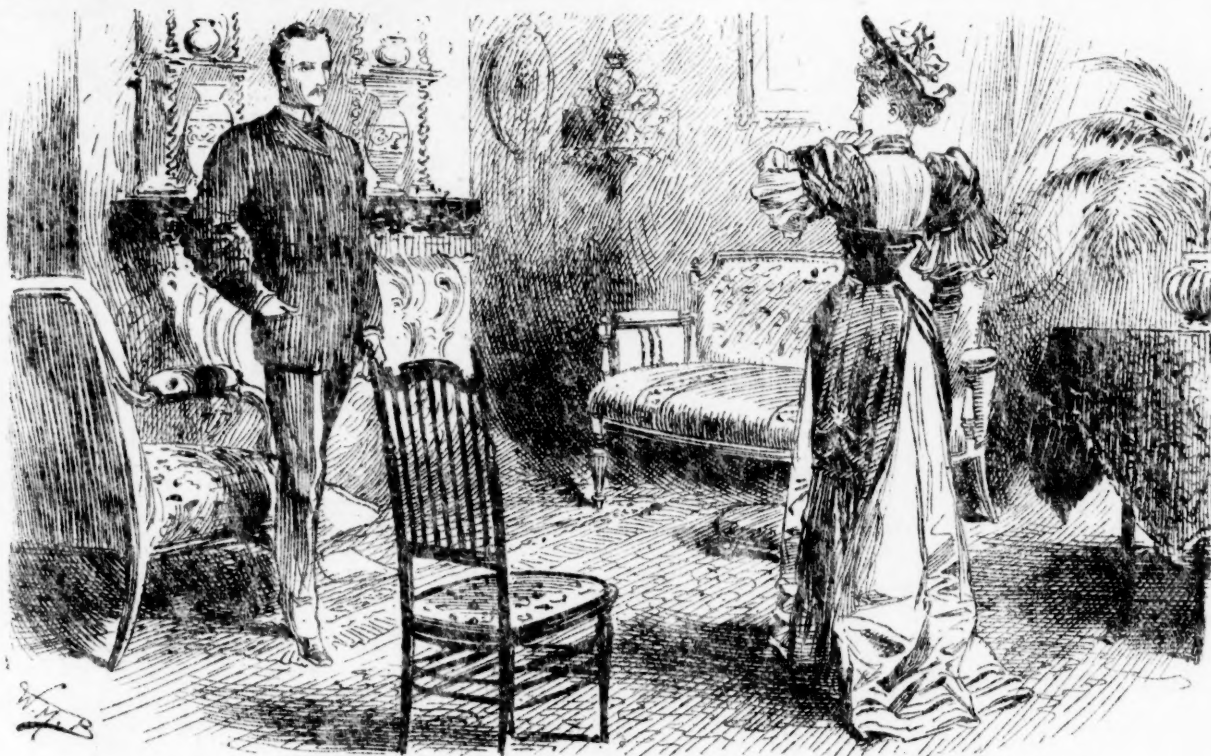
But he had gone too far. Percy was simply beside himself with rage; he took hold of Lang and shook him violently as a dog shakes a bone. In vain the victim yelled for mercy, his antagonist went on until he was tired, then he flung the abject shivering coward from him, and was about to turn his head on the scene, when Lang recovered his breath, and his resolution being taken he drew from his pocket a tiny pistol and took a straight deliberate aim.

The shot was true, Percy Fellowes fell forward on the grass, his white face upturned to the full glare of the summer sun, and at the same moment a heavy hand was laid on Lang's shoulder, and he found himself face to face with the Vicar of High Cliff, while at a hand's distance stood two policemen.

"I give this fellow in charge for an attempted burglary at the Vicarage," said Mr. Armitage, gravely, "but I fear he is wanted on more serious business. Why," as he came near enough to see the fallen man's face, "Heaven help us, it is Mr. Fellowes!"

(To be continued.)

AMONGST the most curious birds of Queensland are those known familiarly as the "Twelve Apostles," from the circumstance that they are always seen in flocks of exactly twelve—never more nor less. Whether such a little company consists of males and females does not seem to be known. But in the nesting season they all build in the same tree, and all feed the nestlings promiscuously. How the number of each flock is always adjusted is one of the unsolved questions presented of the economy of this bird. It is something like a blackbird in appearance, but of a rustier colour.



"GUINEVERE," LORDON MAINWARING EXCLAIMED WITH AN INCREDULOUS STARE, "GUINEVERE—*you!*"

O MISTRESS MINE!

—20—

CHAPTER XIV.

"COMING EVENTS."

"You really must forgive me, and overlook my pitiable weakness, my dear Sir Angus," Mrs. Wentworth said, fanning herself lackadaisically with the gorgeous feather hand screen; "but I was positively quite helpless and unnerved with the shock, and could do nothing for you—absolutely nothing! I—I thought—I thought at first, well, I hardly know, to tell the truth, what I actually *did* think."

As Sir Angus remained silent and thoughtful, Mrs. Wentworth went on; not, however, now without an anxious note in the plaintive, affected tone of her voice,—

"Are you subject to these attacks, dear Sir Angus, may I ask? Because if so you really ought to seek advice in the matter just as speedily as you possibly can—you ought indeed! But doubtless you have already consulted the faculty. I had not the least notion in the world, dear Sir Angus, that you suffered from those awful heart spasms!"

Sir Angus Adair smiled absently, still resting.

He liked to watch Guinevere standing over yonder by the mullioned window. He liked to watch and mark every line and lineament of her perfect beauty, with the proud, yearning, love-lit eyes of happy proprietorship.

Then he remembered that Mrs. Wentworth had been speaking to him.

"Well, yes," he answered quietly, "I have suffered once or twice before in a similar manner. But so far, I have never troubled about advice."

His words awoke a memory in the heart of Guinevere.

As he spoke even, she recalled distinctly, now, how worn and ill he had looked on that memorable afternoon at Ivylands, when he had called

on her to beg for the sacred promise which she had accorded him then.

"You have never yet troubled about advice!" exclaimed Mrs. Wentworth, fretfully, her mind not unnaturally in the circumstances reverting to the past, and the fate of Lady Adair, his mother. "Then you should, Sir Angus. It is downright wicked folly to neglect doing so! By rights you ought to go up to London and consult some leading physician to-morrow, Sir Angus."

"I promise you that I will see about it," he returned, smiling. "I believe there is nothing to worry oneself over, myself."

"That is exactly where it is," cried Mrs. Wentworth, impatiently. "You are doubtful on the point, and know nothing for certain. Believe me, Sir Angus, it is desperately wrong to drive off the attending to those things—and here, in this case, a matter of such vital consequence too!—which should be seen to and comprehended without any delay."

"True," he assented thoughtfully. "I will bear in mind what you have said, Mrs. Wentworth."

"You must do more than merely bear it in mind," the lady was beginning almost sharply—"there is your duty to Guinevere, recollect—"

But Mrs. Wentworth remembered herself, and the rather delicate bearings of the situation, and so ended her reprimand in an inarticulate murmur, honied with her sweetest smile.

Guinevere herself, then, glanced over her shoulder at this devout and loyal lover of hers.

Her beautiful face was still anxious and concerned—softened and tender yet.

"Angus," said she, earnestly, "you must promise me that you will without further procrastination seek the safe opinion of some eminent town physician? Mother is perfectly right for once—you must not be careless and blind. Your health should be studied before all things."

He answered her straightway; his voice betraying how intense was the happiness with which her sweet solicitude—new indeed as it was sweet—thilled him through and through.

"My darling, I promise you!"

Guinevere pressed her forehead to the cooling panes of the mullioned window.

"I must be kinder to him—I *will* be kinder to him for the future," she thought gloomily; "for have not I pledged him my word that I will marry him in six weeks from to-day?"

The bells of the church of St. Eve were chiming sweetly but sleepily, as was their wont, for afternoon service, as Guinevere Wentworth appeared in the High Street, and halted at the Mainwarings' door.

It was not Sunday however; but simply Wednesday.

Ever since the arrival in the parish of the Reverend Mark Sparrow, there had been morning and afternoon service at St. Eve's, regularly every day in the week; in the morning at ten o'clock and in the afternoon at four—"matins" and "evensong" the Reverend Mark called his innovation.

The generality of the good Grayminster folk approved of and commended this new clerical departure; whilst others, of a Low Church turn of mind, disapproved strongly, and talked grimly of Romanism and the interference of the Bishop. However, no one of any importance paid the slightest attention to these malcontents, and the Reverend Mark Sparrow maintained his own course unmolested.

"Miss Mainwaring is out, miss—she has gone to evensong," said the parlourmaid, in answer to Guinevere's inquiry—"but Miss Millicent is at home, I know."

"Thank you. I will see Miss Millicent."

The visitor was conducted straightway to the drawing-room, a large, low, and rather dusky room, considerably more spacious at one end than it was at the other; so that Guinevere, halting there on the threshold with the door closed behind her, was unable at the moment to encompass with her glance the nooks and corners of the wider portion of the room, wherein the

great, old-fashioned fire-place was built with a high curved mantelpiece projecting above it.

The day outside was chilly and gloomy as well, so that the Mainwaring's comfortable, quaint, old drawing-room seemed full of shadows.

The light from the low hearth-place danced and flickered on the dark panelling, and Guinevere, noting how inviting looked the warm red glow of the fire, made her way towards it.

She started greatly at the sight of a young man's figure—some stranger, as she thought—lying idly on the dark panelling, and Guinevere, noting how inviting looked the warm red glow of the fire, made her way towards it.

Apparently he had heard no entering footsteps, nor the opening and shutting of the door; for he was lost in the perusal of a daily newspaper, with his back to Guinevere Wentworth.

Curiosity, involuntarily, propelled her a step nearer to him, and then she cried out in astonishment and dismay.

Naturally enough, at this most unlooked-for invasion of his privacy, the young man threw down his newspaper and sprang to his feet.

"Guinevere," he exclaimed, with an incredulous stare, "Guinevere—you!"

And then what light there was in the room fell upon the face of London Mainwaring, and revealed its stern and pale, with a hard and somewhat pitiless look in those beautiful sombre eyes of his, deep set beneath their dark level brows.

With a wildly fluttering heart Guinevere sank into the nearest seat, striving all the while to regain her scattered wits.

As for Don himself, he spoke no other word, and the silence between them became tense and intolerable—more, indeed, than Guinevere could endure.

"Of course I did not expect to find you here," faltered she at length, lifting proud yet almost pleading eyes to his, and thinking insensibly, as she glanced thus up at him, how boyishly and strikingly handsome he still was looking, standing there not half-a-dozen paces distant from her, with arms folded contemptuously across his breast as he regarded her.

Oh, that silent scorn in his dark, quiet eyes,—it pierced, lacerated, the very heart of Guinevere now!

"No, I suppose not," he returned grimly. "I scarce you somewhat, delectable."

"You see—you see—I had not the slightest notion that you were at home—in Grayminster," she went on precipitately, saying just what came uppermost in her mind, in the pain and confusion of the moment. "I naturally believed you to be—"

—to be—

He would not help her one jot; neither had he offered her a welcoming hand.

"Well!" was all that he said, icily enough. "Miles away, somewhere," she stammered, lamely, and hardly above a whisper.

"And so I was until the day before yesterday," he condescended to explain, then, but speaking still in the most frigid of frigidly polite tones. "However, if you had seen anything of my sister Millicent lately, she might possibly have told you that she had, at my father's request, recently written to me at Strasburg, begging me to return to Grayminster as early as I could conveniently manage the journey home, in order to look after affairs in the office here, as he—my father—just at present, was completely unable to attend to business himself. I quitted Strasburg a few days ago, Miss Wentworth, and arrived here in Grayminster early yesterday."

"Oh, I have seen nothing of Millicent lately!" Guinevere murmured in reply, wincing palpably at the stiff and formal mention of her name. "Miss Wentworth," from the lips of Don Mainwaring!

For rejoinder, on his part, he merely inclined his head.

"And you will be going away again, shortly, I suppose?" she summoned up courage to ask, assuming something of her old listless grace and indifference, though she alone knew how painfully, how cruelly, this undreamed-of meeting had awakened the slumbering memories of the past.

She began to understand—perhaps for the first time in her life—how deeply and unalterably she

loved him, now that it was all too late; how desperately hard it would be for her, in the future, to go honourably through with all that which only yesterday, in the chilly gray park at Minster Court, she had faithfully promised to perform!

Ah, well, she was lying on the bed, which she, of her own free will, in her earthiness, in her shallow worldliness, had made for herself; and London Mainwaring should be the last in the world to guess how thorny and comfortless a rest she was finding it!

He must hate her very cordially, by this time, she thought drearily—but what did it matter? There was for her no such thing as turning back and repenting, now that she had travelled thus far, as it were, on the perilous path she had elected to tread.

Yes, he must hate her, bitterly and completely enough! Did not his carefully-studied coldness and hatefully elaborate politeness of diction explain to her, as plainly indeed as though he had told her so brutally outright, that he had long ago ceased to feel the very faintest interest either in herself or in her doings?

"Going away again shortly, do you ask?" London said, with a careless shrug—"Oh, I dare say, later on, you know. But naturally it all depends very much on my father."

"And you will be glad to go, of course?" she said defiantly—"as glad as you were sorry to return!"

"Possibly—I cannot tell you; for I find that I have not the time to discuss so irrelevant a subject. And now," he added, tranquilly, breaking the silence which was threatening to descend on them again, "you must be good enough to excuse me if I leave you here alone, Miss Wentworth. I have no business here myself; none in the world. Had I been where I ought at this hour, at my post in the office next door, this encounter would then have been avoided, and consequently a good deal of needless unpleasantness have been spared for both myself and you. I am sorry, believe me, that anything of the kind should have occurred; indeed more sorry than I can express; but I now promise you, Miss Wentworth, that it shall not happen again, if I can help it, during the remainder of any of the time that I may be compelled to stay in Grayminster. Possibly the next time that you and I cross each other," he ended significantly, "it will be, at any rate, for you, under a different name, and in different circumstances. However, until then—good-bye!"

She did not answer him, because she could not: neither did he seem in the least to care whether he received a reply from her or not.

There was in her throat an angry, passionate, ever-rising lump, which somehow was filling her eyes with tears and keeping her pale lips sealed together.

His last thrust was a cruel one indeed—at least the way in which it had been delivered was cruel.

"He might have spared me that!" she thought bitterly. "How unfeeling and ungenerous men can be!"

He was gone from her presence, and she found herself by the fireside alone.

She heard the door at the end of the long, low room open and close behind him. She listened with breath suspended to the sound of his light firm tread, until it had died across the hall and was beyond her hearing; and then she sat motionless, with wide and miserable tear-wet eyes, staring straight into the fire, and hands locked together upon her knees. Once she drew a long, quivering sigh; otherwise her misery was dumb.

Millicent Mainwaring, coming in breezily soon, discovered thus her friend Guinevere.

"I am so vexed, Guinevere, darling," said Milly, affectionately, "to have kept you waiting in this unconscionable manner; but I was upstairs with father, you know, and could not come down before."

She wheeled round the deep chair lately occupied by her brother London, so as to face Guinevere; and, having given the fire a friendly poke, Milly sat down herself.

"There is no occasion to apologise, Milly," said Guinevere, sweeping back quickly—as she was prone to do in moments of annoyance or

nervous excitement—with a trembling hand, the feathery, straying, red-gold lovelocks from her smooth white brow. "I have not been alone. I—I have had company" with a little hysterical laugh. "I have seen Don!"

Millicent pursed up her pretty mouth comically, and wondered very much to herself what the meeting between the two had been like.

Her question was, however,—

"And what did he say?"

Guinevere shrugged her fur-clad shoulders slightly, and swallowed that tiresome unpleasant lump which was rising in her throat once more.

"Oh, he was hard on me, of course," she answered, speaking as carelessly as she could. "In fact, horribly and unreasonably hard! Not that I care, you know, Milly, one atom for his harshness, so please do not think that I do for one moment"—rearing now her small head defiantly, yet feeling the whole time, somehow, as though she must weep out her very life then and there with mortification and wounded love on Millicent's faithful bosom. "He also called me 'Miss Wentworth'; and was altogether as strictly polite as though we had just met for the first time in our lives. No, he was far from kind to me, Milly; and though, of course, I scarcely expected actual kindness, still he—he—he might have been kinder, I think."

Millicent sighed heavily.

"Oh, dearie me!" said she, sadly and quaintly, "things are all wrong—wrong throughout, from beginning to end! And, Guinevere, dearest, no one but yourself, has made them so, you know."

Guinevere's small foot was tapping the hearth-rug impatiently.

"Do not you recollect what I once told you, Milly?" she demanded quickly. "I told you, mind you, that I would not come here to be reproached; neither will I. I tell you so again—you shall not reproach me!"

"Very well, dear, so be it," answered Milly quietly. "I will try to remember for the future. By the way, were not you very much surprised to see London?"

"Indeed, yes. I could hardly believe my own eyes," Guinevere said absently. "As I told him, I imagined him to be miles away from Grayminster."

"It was entirely father's doing," Millicent Mainwaring explained—"Don must come home for a while. Father fancied everything must be 'going to the dogs,' as he called it, in the office, and London ought to be there in his place superintending affairs. You see, I have not been out and about for an age, or I should have seen something of you, Guinevere, and have warned you that we were expecting Don home. I have been father's constant nurse and secretary, you know, upstairs."

"I hope he is better," said Guinevere listlessly.

"Thank you, much better. Dr. Jack Roy says that he will be downstairs shortly now."

"And then London will leave you all again, I presume?" questioned Guinevere, with anxiety but ill-concealed.

She was thinking how terrible it would be it, at the expiration of but a little more than five short weeks, London Mainwaring should not have returned to the place whence he had come!

It were better, indeed, that he should be "miles away," then, than lingering anywhere in the neighbourhood of his home and Grayminster.

"Yes, I believe," replied Milly regretfully, "that Don will take himself off again the very instant that father is able to put his foot to the ground. It was awfully good of him to come at once so unselfishly."

"He was always unselfish," assented Guinevere gently, but thoughtfully.

And she sighed as she spoke, a sigh of intense relief. For surely, she was thinking, Mr. Mainwaring would be convalescent and back at his old post in the office, before the dawning of that inevitable day which was yet in the future, thank Heaven, though horribly near at hand nevertheless.

The afternoon was waning, the day was growing grayer, and the people were coming out of church; yet still Guinevere Wentworth lingered

with Millicent amid the cosy fire-flecked shadows of the dusky, long, low room.

"Milly," she said presently, after they had spoken of Ursula's engagement, "Milly dear," her lovely eyes growing wistful, "I want you and Ursula to grant me a favour. I called expressly to gain it from you this afternoon."

"I will grant you anything, my dear," responded Millicent promptly, "but, of course, I cannot really answer for Ursula. She is at the Rectory, I suspect. She attends 'evensong,' as she calls it, with Miss Dinwiddie—as she invariably does now—going in to the Rectory afterwards for a cup of tea. What is your favour, Guinevere?"

Guinevere cleared her voice, and leaned with a beseeching air towards Millicent Mainwaring in the gloaming.

"I am sure you will not refuse me," said Guinevere earnestly, "for I could not bear a refusal from you in this matter. You, Milly, are my dearest friend, and I trust that you will always remain so. I thought, at one time, that you would have thrown me over; but you were true and forgiving, and did not. I cannot forget, Milly, and never shall, that you have been true and loyal to me always. For our long close friendship's sake you must not remember bygones now—for our long close friendship's sake let them now be, dear, just as though they had never been."

"Well, and what does all this mean?" Milly interrogated, puzzled and smiling. It was altogether so unlike Guinevere to plead and sue with humility for any favour, however great.

Her face seemed to pale and harden in the twilight, and the violet eyes, restless and unhappy, dropped before Millicent's curious and questioning ones.

"The fact is," Guinevere said slowly, "I am going to be married in less than six weeks; and, Milly, it will make me wretched—unspeakably wretched—should you and Ursula refuse to be my bridesmaids."

Milly Mainwaring's mouth and eyes simply opened involuntarily with astonishment.

"Surely it is very sudden!" she said at last.

"Yes," Guinevere replied, with unconscious bitterness, "the matter was settled only yesterday. We, mother and I, were at Minster Court for the day; and *he*," she mentioned no name, "he urged me to fix some date—a definite and final date, you know. He had asked me before; and so, yesterday, in a reckless mood, I did as he wished. Milly, I have promised him that I will marry him on the eighth of May—the coming May. He is content; and so it is to be. Milly, will you grant my favour?"

Millicent Mainwaring never hesitated.

As Guinevere herself had humbly suggested, the past and its errors should be, for the time being, as though they never had been; and, for their long friendship's sake, she would never dream of paining Guinevere by refusing her request.

Millicent scarcely thought it likely that Mr. Mainwaring would trouble himself to raise any objection to his two daughters officiating as bridesmaids on Guinevere Wentworth's wedding-day, albeit he had now conceived such a strong dislike of her, on account of her perfidy and her worldliness, which, for Don's sake, he could not bring himself to overlook and pardon just yet.

So Milly, rising, threw her arms around the neck of Guinevere.

"Dearest friend," whispered she, generously, "you may count upon me. Somehow, it all seems very strange and sudden; all the same, I give you my faithful promise. And if I agree, Ursula is certain to do so likewise."

"And with my promise, take my love, and my earnest prayers for your future happiness; and oh, Guinevere, my friend—my darling—my sister that should have been—may your never, never regret, so long as you live, the choice—forgive me, dearest, this once—which you have seen fit to make between the two!"

CHAPTER XV.

"CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE."

THE wan and watery sunlight of an early April morning was pouring through the window into the breakfast-room at Iylands—pouring upon the snow-white table-cloth with its array of china and silver and flowers, presiding over which sat Mrs. Wentworth with her letters, as a clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour of nine.

Facing her mother sat Guinevere.

"I am beginning to think, really," Mrs. Wentworth was saying crossly, as she refolded a letter and pushed it back into its envelope, Guinevere herself expressing no desire to see the contents thereof, "that you have been a trifle too precipitate, Guinevere!"

Guinevere, unfortunately for her mother's patience, chanced to be on that morning in one of her most listless, exasperating, and independent moods.

"Too precipitate, mother!" she repeated, idly. "Pray, in what direction, I should like to hear!"

"You know perfectly well in what direction as well as I do," returned the elder lady, sharply. "Why should you go and make such a ridiculous arrangement with Angus Adair, without ever consulting me on the question?"

Guinevere coolly and lazily milked and sugared her tea. Then she stirred it gently round and round before replying.

"Ridiculous arrangement!" said she at last. "Why, mother, it was only the other day that I told you what I had done, and you were overjoyed!—or affected to be so," added Guinevere, disrespectfully.

"Yes," rejoined Mrs. Wentworth, fretfully but letting the anger pass—"Yes, I know. But how, I should like to understand now, is everything necessary to be accomplished satisfactorily within so short a time?"

"Why, here, for instance, is a most annoying note from Miss Tomkins, declaring that it is next to an impossibility for her to get all those frocks home by a date even so late as the sixth!"

"When I drove the pony into Pockington last Thursday she told me, then, that she thought the thing could be managed easily; and now the woman writes that, upon further consideration, the whole matter is an impracticability!"

"She promises the white satin, of course, faithfully, and a few of the others, late on the sixth; the rest, she coolly states, must really wait. An important and heavy mourning order has intervened—that is the creature's excuse! What in the world are we to do, Guinevere?"

"Do? Why, do without them, to be sure," answered Guinevere, carelessly.

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Wentworth shrilly. "Are you then to go off with your husband, with a *trousseau* only half-packed? Gracious, goodness, Guinevere, you must be out of your mind, and will soon drive me out of mine too!"

"It is all your own fault entirely, mother, if you are put out and distressed," remarked Guinevere, with beautiful composure. "Did I not tell you emphatically that I wanted no fuss or nonsense, or anything approaching it, and I expressed the same wish in very plain terms to Sir Angus himself, that day we were at Minster Court with him. There will be heaps of time for the making up of anything that I may actually need for the occasion; and so long as I get the dress home by the sixth, or even the seventh, why, what more will be necessary?"

"Of course, if, in the face of all my protestations and emphatically expressed desires, you will insist upon getting together a crowd of things which are totally and absolutely unnecessary, and which it is impossible, as the woman herself points out, to make up and send home, with so little time for the work, I say then that the disappointment is through no fault of my own. I never even asked you, mother, for one-quarter of all the extravagant things which you have thought proper to send off to Miss Tomkins."

Mrs. Wentworth set down her breakfast-cup, and wiped away with her handkerchief an imaginary tear from her flaxen eyelashes.

"You are horribly ungrateful, Guinevere," whimpered she—"ungrateful to the last degree!"

Shakespeare—or someone—says something, somewhere or other, about an 'ungrateful child'—a comparison about 'a serpent's tooth'—which indeed is true enough! Is it not the most natural thing in the world that I should wish to give my child, my only child, into the care and protection of a husband, with—with only common decency?" added Mrs. Wentworth reproachfully, finding herself rather at a loss for a suitable and telling phrase.

"And shall I not, then, be given up into the keeping of Angus Adair, with what you call common decency?" questioned Guinevere, with irritating humility.

"Barely with common decency, after all," snapped the mother; "and certainly with a scantily-furnished wardrobe."

Guinevere shrugged her beautiful shoulders with that faultless, almost imperceptible movement of hers, and said, ironically, with golden-brown brows going faintly upward too,—

"Is he going to marry me, then, for my wardrobe?"

To this Mrs. Wentworth deigned no reply; but presently launched forth upon the airing of another grievance.

It was astonishing sometimes how many petty troubles she seemed to be burdened with, when she and Guinevere were alone with each other—how peevish and quarrelsome she could invariably show herself, apart from society and society's restraints.

"And then there are the bridesmaids, too," resumed Mrs. Wentworth now, a dissatisfied frown puckering her powdered brow—"a really fashionable wedding, with a baronet for bridegroom, with only four—"

"Mine is not going to be a fashionable function, or anything approaching it," Guinevere interrupted, with cold decision. "I hate all such scenes, and do not believe in them. I particularly wish this marriage of mine to be as quiet and unpretending as possible; and as I happen to be, myself, the chief performer in the comedy," she added bitterly, "I certainly mean to have my own way in the matter."

"Only four bridesmaids!" grumbled on Mrs. Wentworth, taking not the slightest notice of the interruption, "and there ought at the very least to be just twice that absurd number! I really think, Guinevere, that you might ask Angus to invite other ladies of his family to be present on the eighth. Surely he has more cousins than those frightful Miss Lee-Warners!"

"I neither know nor care. But he tells me that he is very fond of the Lee-Warner people—they are his favourite cousins," was Guinevere's reply. "If he possessed a hundred more, I would never consent to the asking of any one of them."

"And there are Margaret Sumner and Cecilia Clumleigh, too," fumed Mrs. Wentworth. "Why cannot we invite either one or the other of them? It would be only fair and civil towards Lady Clumleigh, to invite Cecilia as a bridesmaid, particularly after that lovely present of theirs!"

"It is too late," was the girl's flat answer, as she toyed with her tiny gold egg-spoon; "and even were it not, I should not ask them, because I do not want them. Angus's two cousins, the Lee-Warner girls, and Ursula and Millicent Mainwaring, are the four whom I have chosen—those and no others."

"Oh, so Ursula has agreed to make one of them, has she?" Mrs. Wentworth interrogated, with just a flicker of animation and interest in the question. "I suppose the ceremony will be of unusual concern for her, as she will be shortly going through the same thing herself. She was not at home, you said, when you called there the other day?"

"No," said Guinevere, growing sick of the theme. "But I met her in Grayminster yesterday with Miss Dinwiddie, and we spoke of the matter then, and settled it."

"Ah, and Loudon Mainwaring himself is at home again, I hear," Mrs. Wentworth observed, with sudden blandness and vivacity, delighted secretly at finding an opportunity for punishment. Guinevere a little for her maddening obstinacy. "I thought he had gone abroad for two years!"

I am sure some one told me so! What about Don Mainwaring, Guinevere—surely we ought to ask him?"

Guinevere never flinched; though truly it cost her a painful effort to speak easily and composedly then.

"Yes, Loudon Mainwaring is at home, I know, but it is only on account of his father's illness," she said, very coldly and evenly. "By the eighth of May, however, he will probably be no longer in Grayminster—he will have returned to his studies on the Continent. At least, I pray that he may so have returned," she added fervently, under her breath.

"Ah—I see; I understand!" Mrs. Wentworth remarked, checked for the moment, but not quieted. "I was much surprised indeed, when I heard that he was back again. When did the boy arrive, dear Guinevere?"

"Days ago now, I believe," replied Guinevere. "You never mentioned to me that you knew Loudon was in Grayminster. It was Lady Chamleigh who gave me the information," Mrs. Wentworth said.

"Did I not?" said Guinevere carelessly. "I suppose I forgot it, mother."

"Is it likely, I wonder, that you would forget such a circumstance?" Mrs. Wentworth ventured. "Though of course it is wiser by far to remember no longer his existence. It shows your good sense, Guinevere."

And then she smiled and showed her teeth pleasantly, gold and all unwittingly.

She was beginning to feel in a better humour, having delivered herself, as it were, of a portion of her venom.

She could not well restrain herself from inflicting the pain of that last stab—Guinevere had so sorely taxed her endurance, with her quiet perseverance and unflinching obstinacy.

"And you yourself have done nothing, mother, have you, towards the helping me to forget his existence, as you phrase it?" the girl demanded, with bitter irony.

And Mrs. Wentworth looked scared then for a moment, as though conscious of having trespassed too boldly on strictly-forbidden ground.

Without another word, but with a swelling, passionate heart, Guinevere rose from the table and strolled over to the window, which, at an angle, commanded a view of the park at Minster Court.

"There is Sir Angus, mother," she announced, frigidly—"he is crossing the road and coming here. I will go and meet him."

The window of the breakfast-room opened to the lawn, and Guinevere stepped out into the garden, leaving Mrs. Wentworth herself flustered at the table, settling and arranging herself for a "graceful effect" by the time that her prospective son-in-law should enter from the garden to greet her.

So Guinevere met her lover midway between the house and the drive-gates.

He appeared to be in excellent spirits, and, stooping in the shelter of the trees, greeted her tenderly.

"And so you saw me coming, dearest?" said he, with the proud smile of possession.

"Yes," she answered gently. "From the window I saw you crossing the road, and came out at once to meet you."

"How sweet of you, Guinevere," he whispered gratefully—"how good you are to me, dear."

He drew her passive hand through his arm as he spoke, and they paced the leafy drive together. The April showers and a warm spring sun had done wonders for the garden at Ivylands lately.

She could not but notice how unusually blithe he was in his manner to-day—how his ordinarily grave and thoughtful face was singularly animated for him.

And she wondered within herself, as she walked by his side, what could have wrought the change?

"You did not come over to us, yesterday," she observed; but there was noticeable in her voice never the shadow of a disappointment at the circumstance—no pain, no jealousy, no suspicion—but that, in his own happiness, he failed to mark. "How did it happen so, Angus? Tell me."

"And you missed me, did you, Guinevere?" he returned eagerly, meeting her question with another.

"Of course," she said. "Why did you not come?"

"I will tell you, Guinevere," replied Sir Angus Adair. "Ah, my darling," he went on joyously—"I have good news for you, right good news, my peerless Guinevere, and I have hastened over to Ivylands at this unconscionably early hour this morning, because I was so impatient for you, my dear one, to share the good tidings with me! Dearest love, what do you think?"

(To be continued.)

CINDERELLA.

—10:—

CHAPTER XXIV.

As she uttered these two syllables Pauline staggered back and sank into an arm-chair which providentially stood close behind her.

As soon as she could find words, she gasped out,—

"Wretched woman, it is false! You are crazy with jealousy, insane to avenge yourself at any cost. Do not think that I will believe you; for, although Sir Philip is weak and inconsistent, and has long cast me out of his heart, I bear his name—I am his wife. I know that he is incapable of what you say."

"Facts are stubborn things, Lady Curzon," she returned, coolly seating herself opposite, and leaning her elbows on the table as she spoke. "I may be insane for revenge, crazy with jealousy (in a furious whisper), but facts all the world over speak for themselves."

"And what do these facts say?" she asked in a firmer voice.

"They say that on the 25th of June, 1875, Philip Curzon took the life of Lorenzo Villiani."

"As how?" bringing the question forth with difficulty.

"Well, it is a long story, but you have every right to hear it, and you shall."

"I knew your husband years ago, how many years ago there is no need to say. We were—friends," she added, with slow significance. "I had several suitors, who pestered me much, among others a handsome Italian, with the head of a Greek god, the figure of a young gladiator, the tongue of a poet, and the heart of a serpent!"

"I liked him in a way—I was a woman. I was taken by his face, his eloquent black eyes, his boundless devotion."

"I did not know that he was steeped in debt, that it was the golden charms of the widow Bert he was enamoured of, not herself; but Philip, who hated Villiani, had keener vision. Philip was jealous; Philip opened my eyes, but Philip opened them too late. I may as well confess at once that I was bewitched by Villiani, that I listened to all doubts and sneers with smiles of derision; the other men were jealous, that was all."

"They did not stop to pick their words, they called him a Greek adventurer, a gambler, a *roué*. But all is fair in love and war. Lorenzo was as handsome as Apollo. He was an excellent wooer, an impassioned lover; for once he carried me, figuratively, off my feet."

"I listened to him. I went further, I secretly married him. I was younger then; I liked the mystery, the intrigue, the delights of laughing in my sleeve at all my other lovers."

"I was fond of Lorenzo, who, strange as it may appear, never showed any wish to take the public into our confidence, but was satisfied to spend a good deal of my money in presents to myself and servants, and at the gaming table, and to be my secret slave and adorer."

"One evening late, Lorenzo and I were sitting alone on my balcony—it overlooked the sea-shore at a height of forty feet, and we often sat there looking out on the moonlit sea—the luteen-shaped sails of the fishing boats, I in a fool's paradise, my

head resting on his shoulder, his arm round my waist, he acting his part admirably, as it turned out."

"We were suddenly intruded on this evening by Sir Philip, who had been admitted under the impression that I was out boating and that he would await my return. I had not seen him for ten days or more, and he had left me in a passion."

"He came upon us unawares; we all were startled as he stood in the big window which opened on the balcony. I was embarrassed and annoyed, but I tried to make the best of the situation, to affect to treat Sir Philip's arrival as a matter of course, but it was of no use."

"He was half crazy with jealousy. To be frank, I had encouraged him, his eyes were on fire, his face in a flame with passion. He took me by the wrist—he, a cool-blooded Englishman—and hissed out, pointing with his other hand to Lorenzo,—

"What is he to you?"

"I drew myself back, and laughed, slightly."

"Answer me," he demanded, in a voice of thunder. And as I knew that the truth must be known sooner or later, and I had had my little drama pretty well played out, I said,—

"You are behaving like a brute, but you shall have your answer—he is my husband!"

"He is not," he cried, incredulously. "You have never married him! Oh, surely, I am not too late?"

"Too late! Yes, my friend," said Lorenzo, triumphantly, "we were married by the civil power three weeks ago. You are a good deal too late."

"And what about your other wife?" said Sir Philip, hoarsely.

"My other wife? I have none. You are mad," returned Lorenzo, speaking with much emotion.

"Madame Bert, I am sorry for you. Valerie, you would not be warned. This wretch, this ruffian before you, is no more your husband than I am; he was married to a Miss Rivers two years ago. I went to England expressly to inquire, and my suspicions were justified."

"It is all lies, don't believe him," put in Lorenzo, in a kind of scream; "he is mad, he is a crazy fool. We will have him turned out," rushing towards the door.

But Philip caught him quickly by the collar, and brought him promptly back (for Philip was twice as powerful as Villiani).

"This house was lonely; it was a kind of pagoda, a summer-house, at the end of our orange garden, and only frequented by me and my most intimate friends, who more than once had remarked, jestingly, that I might be murdered there, and no one would know; but I had no fear."

"It was charmingly fitted up, roomy, cheerful, and secluded, looked right down on the Mediterranean, that softly lapped the walls; as its foot the blue, bright, quivering bay, and far stretching sea wall, and picturesque wooded coast—"

"But—bah!" contemptuously, "this is not what I have come to tell you—to my story."

"Sir Philip, still holding Lorenzo tightly by the collar, being thrice as powerful, said,—

"Dare to deny that you have a wife in England, an elderly woman. You married her for her money, which money you ran through in two years and left her penniless to return home an all but beggar. It is known that you beat her and ill-treated her, till you wrung the very last sovereign from her; that you forged her sister's name. Ah! ha! Mr. Lorenzo, that you are no more a Count Villiani than you are an honest man, but that you are a common, low-born Greek, a forger, a bigamist, a cheat! that there is no crime to which you would not stoop for money. Dare to deny it an you will!" shaking him, "I have proofs."

"Let me go," said Lorenzo, hoarsely, and looking like an animal driven to bay, and he let him go with a contemptuous push that sent him half staggering across the room."

"And is it true? Is all this true?" I asked, I don't know how, for I was nearly frantic.

"It was only too true. Philip had copies of the certificate of marriage, of the fact that Miss Rivers, the real wife, was living. It was all too horribly true. What was to be done? Was he to be prosecuted, and my name and fame dragged through the mud? No! never!

"Philip discussed the matter before him calmly, whilst he (Villiani) sat with his head in his hands, his elbows leaning on the table, as if he were turned into stone.

"I see nothing for it," said Philip—"the marriage, as you say, was secret, luckily for you—nothing for it but to buy him off, give him his price, and let him go. Let him take his choice between that and the gallows."

"You can imagine how awful this was for me," she proceeded, once more feverishly pacing the room.

"I could not bring it home to myself. I could not realize it. I felt as if I was looking on at some mad drama, in which I had no part, but I said,—

"'Lorenzo, why did you deceive me?'

"I said a great deal more, of course, and more forcibly, and got no answer, until I had written him out, or rather Philip had, a large cheque—his bribe, his payment for betraying me! I was quite beside myself with anger, with passion. I was nearly crazy, and as I gave him the money I leant across the table and struck him in the mouth with all my force. It did me good."

She looked perfectly capable of having planted a dagger in his heart as she said these words, with an expression that tempted one to think that she looked upon it as one of her most praiseworthy actions.

"And then a storm broke, as it were, all round. I had roused his ape-like passions. He broke into a torrent of abuse as he pocketed the money. He declared that money was all he wanted. He unmasked himself then and there. He hated me, my eyes, my tempers, my sorrow face, my red hair. Beast! he only wanted my money, he swore, and to humble Sir Philip. 'A wife! another wife!' no thank you, shrugging his shoulders, and he audaciously defied us to betray him.

"He insulted Philip beyond endurance with the lash of his mocking, stinging tongue, and in an instant Philip struck him, and then they were wrestling together like a pair of wild animals.

"Backwards, forwards, upwards, downwards, tables upset, chairs knocked over, curtains dragged down, and I stood by, the paralysed witness. Philip was strong, Lorenzo was supple, and writhed, and bent and doubled like a snake.

"In the end they staggered, locked together, to the balcony, and here was the tug of war indeed. Philip had the best of it. The other knew it, and released his hand (which he had long been struggling to do), and drew a sharp glittering knife. I saw it shine in the moonlight. In another minute it was plunged into Philip's side, but it glanced from his watch, and in so doing saved his life.

"Infuriated, Philip lifted the treacherous wretch over the balcony to hurl him into the sea, but the other held him with such a tenacious grip, both by hands and teeth, that they both went over together, and fell with a loud, dull splash into the sea below. I must stop," she panted, "I am out of breath," wiping her lips with her handkerchief, and pausing for some seconds.

But Pauline did not speak. She sat in her place as motionless as a statue, and never moved her eyes from the woman before her.

"Well I must be quick and finish," she continued once more, starting afresh. "I had the presence of mind to go down by the stairs inside the pavilion to the gate opening into the sea as fast as I could totter. I opened the gate and looked out. There was only one black speck in the water, only one man to be seen swimming. That man was Philip. No trace of the other has ever been found from that hour to this. He sank like a stone."

Here she paused expressively.

"It was not murder—it was in self-defence,"

said Lady Curzon, slowly. "No jury would find him guilty," said Pauline, in a tone of fervent relief.

"Would they not? I shall appear as witness. I shall state that he threw him over. I shall denounce him," she hissed, between her teeth.

"You dare not perjure yourself, you wicked woman!" exclaimed the other, in an awe-struck key.

"I dare anything! Philip would have confessed all at once, and had a search, but for me. He was too exhausted to move, or scarcely speak. He implored me to send for help, for boats. I pretended that I did, but I did not. If Lorenzo was discovered alive my reputation was gone, as well as his, which was worthless, and dead men tell no tales. There was no search, and Philip and I alone know the fate of Lorenzo Villiani! a fate he richly deserved," she concluded, decisively.

Pauline had grown first very red, then very white, as she gazed at her companion incredulously, and then she said,—

"If you do carry your threats into execution they will fall to the ground. I am prepared to use the weapon you have most strangely put into my hand—your confession, your confidence. I will swear to it all in a court of justice, and your wickedness will fall upon your own head."

"Ah! how clever you are, dear Lady Curzon," she said, with one comprehensive, disdainful glance. "But you forget that a wife cannot give evidence for or against her husband. I tell you the truth, so that when he is hanged it will be a kind of melancholy satisfaction for you to know that he was not quite such a wretch as he appeared to the British public—a man who seized another much weaker than himself, and lunged him over a balcony into the deep sea, and let him drown, and held his tongue. It's not a pretty story," nodding her head expressively.

"Are you lost to all truth, gratitude, and human feeling? Are you a fellow-creature? Are you a woman?" demanded Pauline, half-paralysed by such sentiments, her tongue all but cleaving to the roof of her mouth.

"I am a woman, and you know that line about a woman scored! If you would save your husband from a great deal of unpleasantness—if you would save the Curzon name from figuring in large type in all the newspapers—if you would save yourself from being pointed at as the man's wife, make Sir Philip cut himself adrift from Conny Derwent's leading strings," unlocking the door with energy as she spoke.

She paused on the threshold, looked back at the shrinking figure still sitting at the table with a glance of warning more potent than words, and closed the door behind her with a resonant bang that shook the house from cellar to garret.

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER this very exciting interview Pauline sat motionless for nearly half-an-hour; she felt that she had received a kind of mental knock on the head, and could not stir.

Sometimes she asked herself if Madame Bert was a sane woman. Would any sane woman come to her enemy and unveil her past and her evil designs, and lay bare the workings of her wicked heart with such unblushing audacity? And Pauline had ceased to care for, or respect her husband.

He was weak, capricious, vain, and easily led in private life, whatever he might be in public. He had plucked her as a wild flower out of the hedge to gratify his passing fancy, and set her among greenhouse plants, and left her to wither. Love had struggled long, and died hard; but it was dead.

Nothing kills so surely as the icy winds of nipping indifference—nothing blights as effectually as neglect.

Love was dead, but duty remained. It was her duty to warn her husband, and to put him on his guard against Madame Bert and her amiable projects.

Although Letty was, figuratively speaking,

panting to hear the full and true particulars of the long, mysterious interview, and the errand or business of the red-headed woman in brown, for once her friend was unable to satisfy her. Much as she would have liked to confide in her she dare not; prudence sealed her lips.

Pauline did not know how to lay her plans, or how to warn her husband. Should she write? Should she go to his hotel and seek an interview? No, she preferred to trust to a chance meeting; she was sure to see him if she went and sat on the pier about four o'clock, and she accordingly took her seat there under the shade of her big black lace parasol, and waited, and did not wait in vain.

Before five o'clock struck she saw all the merry party trooping gaily down from the hotel.

They passed her closely, and as Sir Philip almost touched her she stood up and laid her hand on his arm, and said,—

"Philip, I want to speak to you—alone."

"Pauline!" he exclaimed in unfeigned amazement. "How on earth do you come to be here!"

"For my health," she returned quietly.

"I'm awfully glad to see you looking all right. Of course you'll come."

She interrupted him with a gesture of her hand and said,—

"I have come to speak to you particularly, Philip, to say what I must say to you alone," glancing significantly at the rest of the party (which did not include Madame), and had loitered slowly on in front unacquainted with her identity.

"All right then, walk behind, and tell me what it is. We are as much alone out here, if we like, as if we were in the middle of a desert. What's it all about?"

"About Madame Bert. She holds a secret of yours; she came and told it to me this morning," lowering her voice.

"She did!" he echoed, turning rather pale. "I declare to you, Pauline, it was an accident. It might have been me; we both fell over together. And this is what I get, and deserve it, for saving her from that scandal!"

"It is," returned his wife, with cool decision; "and more, she is going to give you up to justice to turn witness, false witness, to denounce you—to have, if she can, your life."

"And for what—why?" he interrupted, angrily.

"On account of Miss Derwent, your preference for Miss Derwent!" she answered unhesitatingly.

"I swear to you, Pauline!" he exclaimed. "At times I believe Madame Bert is mad. What a plague you women are! You quarrel with me because I paid Valerie a little attention!"

"A little!" she echoed, with amused contempt.

"Well, then, a good deal of attention, if you will have it, but everyone does the same, and there's no harm in it—only you are so cold, so unimpressionable yourself—you have such queer, old-fashioned ideas."

"Never mind my ideas; they are not worth discussing now. At any rate, they are unalterable," she said coolly.

"Yes, you women are so obstinate, and so queer. Here, as I say, are you, who are madly jealous of Valerie—Valerie crazy—because I am civil to Connie Derwent; you leave me and go off to Paris in the sulks, that's your way! Valerie declares she will put a rope round my neck, that's her way," in a tone of repressed fury.

"Here's the most dangerous way," returned his wife, coolly. "Be advised by me; shun the too delightful society of Miss Derwent, or evil will befall you. I can assure you that Madame means to keep her word."

"What a thing it is to be in a woman's power!" he exclaimed, passionately. "I wish the whole tribe were extinct."

"What! even including Miss Connie Derwent?" exclaimed his companion in feigned horror.

"Yes, I don't care really a straw for her," passionately; "nor for Valerie, nor—for —"

"For me. Don't mind saying so," she added, sweetly. "I have known the fact this last two years, it's no wonderful secret," she concluded with easy serenity.

"How changed you are Pauline!" he said

looking at her steadily; "you are quite a *grande dame*—a woman of the world. You are fifty times handsomer than when I married you. Supposing—" pausing suddenly.

"Supposing what?" she asked indifferently. "Supposing I promise to be a good boy, and we make a fresh start once more. What do you say?"

"I say *no*!" she answered without a second's hesitation. "I will nurse you in sickness, I will warn and, if need be, help you in danger. I will never forget that I bear your name—but share my life with you again, never! Who passes by the gates of disillusion has died twice."

No one watching this couple walking slowly up and down would have guessed at the importance of the topic discussed between them.

They only saw a tall, singularly striking looking girl dressed in black, walking and talking very quietly with a good-looking man in yachting dress, apparently many years older than herself.

She was noticed, needless to say, by Sir Philip's companions (and had declined an introduction to them) which he eagerly pressed upon her.

He would have liked them to have seen what a beautiful young woman was Lady Curzon. He felt an odd pride in her appearance now—her walk, air, and bearing, but he was denied this satisfaction; for when they came to the end of the pier she said—

"One word more, Philip, be advised by *me*, and be warned. You know my address if you want *me*. I am not returning to Paris at present," and with a slight gesture of farewell she stepped into an open carriage that was waiting her, and drove rapidly away.

"Who—who was that handsome girl you were walking with?" demanded his two lady friends as he joined them on the pier.

Sir Philip stammered, coloured, looked a good deal embarrassed, and at last boldly took the bull by the horns, and said—

"Well, there's no use in fencing with you, I see. You must know, you say; you are dying to hear, and you shall. The girl in black, as you call her, was my wife."

Tableau!

These ladies had been under an impression that Lady Curzon was an invalid, that there was something very odd about her, that she was a little queer in the head; indeed, some kind friends had amiably hinted that she was in a *maison de santé* in Paris.

And here she appeared, as if she had dropped from the clouds, with the face of a picture, the figure and walk of an Andalusian, and the dress of a Frenchwoman.

What did it all mean? But no one was going to tell them that.

A few days afterwards Pauline was much surprised to receive a begging letter from her elder sister.

She had continued a small allowance to them, but rarely held any intercourse with Mount Rivers.

The letter was one evidently wrung from a woman in absolute despair and grinding, actual want.

"I know," it said, "you are the last person in the world to whom we should look for assistance, that we were not sisters to you, that I never redeemed my promise to your dear mother, and it seems to me that for this reason a curse, or, at any rate, a blight, has fallen upon us."

You can never know what our sufferings have been, and our punishment has been heavy. We absolutely want the necessities of life. You cannot imagine our poverty. I do not know where to turn for a shilling. I have no one I could ask, for shame's sake, among our neighbours. You are rich, and you are our sister. Although we have no claim on you, having forfeited it long ago, yet we are daughters of the same father, and you, I know, would not let us starve. Send us ten or twenty pounds, for our father's sake."

Pauline was a young woman of sudden impulses.

She made up her mind that she herself would take them the money; she would go and see Mount Rivers once more.

If her sisters chose she would take the place off their hands, as she was the heiress; renew it, refurnish it, and establish them comfortably elsewhere in any part of England that they pleased.

She thought all this as she hastily superintended the packing of her portmanteau by Sophy, who had long ere this rejoined her mistress, and who was to accompany her in her hurried journey.

Pauline liked the excitement of sudden, swift changes; she liked to be doing something; she liked to give her restless, whispering, craving thoughts some new outlet, and this journey would occupy her mind.

Her sisters generally gave her plenty to meditate on.

She received Matilda's letter in the morning; and the same afternoon (with solemn promises of a speedy return) she took leave of Letty at the station, and started by the afternoon mail direct for Mount Rivers, for the first time since she had been the wife of Sir Philip Curzon—the first time since she walked out of its door in her wedding dress, and her mother's diamonds.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PAULINE, of course, was quite unexpected by her sisters, and her arrival was the last thing they dreamt of.

She left Sophy and her luggage at the Rivers Arms, a clean, old-fashioned inn, in the village, and walked up to the house alone.

It was a beautiful August evening; there was hardly a breath of air to stir the leaves in the surrounding plantations, nor a sound to break the almost solemn, melancholy silence, except the tread of her own light feet on the avenue, and the loud cawing of homeward-sailing rooks.

Mount Rivers had once more sunk into its former decayed and neglected state.

The short rehabilitation it had had was a mere flicker of the candle. The weeds were higher and more rampant, and flourishing, the grass longer, the timber more neglected than ever.

Half the windows and more than half of the houses as it came in sight, showed blind eyes, as it were—shutters up.

One of the chimneys had been blown down. The bricks and mortar were still lying where they fell.

It looked a dreary, doomed kind of place, as if, as Matilda had said, there was a curse resting upon it and its inmates.

As Pauline came nearer, walking now on the grass at the side of the avenue, she overtook a man, pacing slowly before her, with a stick in his hand, his head bent down, also walking on the grass.

As she came quickly up behind him, and he was aware of her presence, he started with an exclamation, and with a face of nervous horror curious to witness.

However, he appeared to be relieved in his mind at the first glance. It was only a woman—a well-dressed young woman.

He recognised her, though she had never beheld him before, and returned his scrutiny as he stood barring her path with a look of cool, contemptuous surprise.

He was a thin, dark, youngish man with well-cut features, and shifty black eyes, whose whole appearance bore witness to habits of dissipation. His features were swelled and bloated out of their once classic shape.

His nose was red, his eyes bloodshot, his hands trembling, his clothes shabby, soiled, and thrown on regardless of appearances.

Pauline surveyed him with amazement, as he said in a thick, hoarse voice, with a slight foreign accent—

"Who are you? What do you want here?"

"I want to see Madame Villaini and Miss Rivers," she returned promptly. "Permit me to pass."

"You are their sister, little Pauline, are you not? Lady Curzon, the Russian Countess, ha, ha!" with an inharmonious laugh. "What do you want with them? They never see anyone,

and they shan't, unless you are bringing them money," as if struck by a sudden happy thought. "Sir Philip is at his old games I hear," he added with a leer, bending towards her with both his hands in his pockets and peering into her indignant face. "If it's not one, it's another. It's his way. *Toujours, toujours*."

"Let me pass," said the young lady, with a gesture of her arm, as though she would sweep him aside. "I don't know you, nor wish to know you."

"Oh, the Countess is proud!" making room on the pathway, and letting her proceed, but keeping up with her all the time. "I daresay it will be an agreeable surprise, then, for you to know that I have the honour of presenting myself to you as your brother-in-law."

"What do you mean?" darting a look of scorn out of her dark eyes at her shabby companion.

"You have heard of the Count Villaini?"

She could scarcely restrain a little shudder as she gave her head a quick jerk of assent.

"He was said to be dead, but it was not true; he returned after all—alive, to the arms of his adoring Matilda. I," laying his hand on his heart, and making a deep obeisance, "am Lorenzo Villaini, restored to my enraptured relations."

"What!" exclaimed his listener, in a key of amazed incredulity. "Why, you were said to be drowned. I—I—stammering—"it is impossible; I don't believe it."

"Who told you that I was drowned?" he asked, pausing suddenly. "Not Matilda, not Carrie?"

"No, but an eye-witness. You are an impostor; you are not Lorenzo Villaini; you are impostering upon those unhappy women—you know you are."

"Ah, you have heard Madame Bert's little story, I see," he said after a moment's silence.

"Madame Bert thinks I became fond for the fishes, and so," with a chuckle of satisfaction, "did he; but I did not draw my first breath among the Greek Islands for nothing. I can swim. I can dive like an Arab at Aden. The water was my element; I have no fear of it except,"

with a laugh at his own wit, "to drink. I disappeared. She told you so much, for her own ends, I suppose, to disgust you with that foolish big Englishman of yours, she told you all! It was convenient for me to be missing. There were circumstances," with the suspicion of a barbarous wink,

"that made the situation unpleasant. I had money. I rambled about under another name. I got into another scrape, and finally, like the prodigal, I came home *à me ruiné*," bowing, and removing his shabby hat, "and entirely at your service."

"But it is not known—your return," she stammered, at last. "No one has heard of it."

"No, nor is it to be known beyond ourselves," he answered with a certain menace in his fiery dark eye. "I am Count Villaini's brother. Please to bear that in mind. His dearest, only, best beloved twin brother," with an ironical smile.

"And why, if you are Lorenzo Villaini, do you hide your identity?"

"For many reasons, most beautiful young lady, reasons that would be riddles to you. I tell you who I really am. I will give you an interest in me," smiling with foolish complaisance. "but in reality it is a dead, dead, dead secret that Lorenzo is alive. Do you see the joke?" complacently.

"I cannot say that I do," very stiffly, and speaking in a frozen tone.

"Another thing—one word more—not a word to Matilda about the little trick I played on Madame Bert" (thus did he humorously allude to his secret, bigamous marriage). "The old woman is as jealous as Juno! She wouldn't even like me to talk to you. She would not let me see you when you were in the house before!"

Did this faded, shabby, bloated-looking man still imagine that he was yet the Adonis who had wiled away many foolish women's hearts in spite of their better reason—who had, fondly fancied—poor creatures!—that a Greek profile, irresistible dark eyes, and brilliant teeth, must belong only to the best, most chivalrous, honourable, loyal of men, instead of being the false mask of the most crafty, unscrupulous reprobate who

ever whispered sweet nothings into a woman's deluded ear!

"There is one person who must know," said Pauline at last, in a tone of unusual decision.

"Must know?" he echoed. "And who is that, pray?" angrily.

"Philip. He shall know at once! It is cruel to have kept him in the dark!"

"And I tell you," speaking between his teeth, and dropping his guise of civility for one of threatening brutality, "that he shall not know—shall never know! What a fool I was to tell you; but you will be a greater fool if you repeat it! For if you do—" nodding his head, menacingly.

"Keep your threats for those who are afraid of them. Count Villani, thief, swindler, forger, cheat, bigamist! I am not the sort of woman you take me for! I shall treat you and your secret how and as I please!" she returned, confronting him with a face of white defiance. "You are in my power; I am not in yours! Please to bear that in mind, Count Villani!"

Count Villani's face during this speech was truly a sight to see—amazement, horror, doubt, and rage chased each other across the visage in turn, and were swallowed up in the end in a tumult of passion.

He ground his teeth, he stamped the ground, he clenched his fists, as he rolled forth imprecations and denunciations and curses in a foreign—in fact, the modern Greek—language—a language, happily for herself at the present moment, unknown to Pauline.

At last he came to the end of his breath and stopped short, and glaring at his companion with the look of a wild beast, said, as he pointed a shaky, sawn forefinger,—

"Go! You will find your sisters in there," indicating the dilapidated mansion there. "I will talk to you again," and abruptly turning on his heel, he plunged into an adjoining shrubbery and disappeared from her sight.

Pauline hurriedly walked on and reached the hall door. It stood open. The paint was all blistered, and had come off in patches; grass was growing up between the steps, the bell was rusty and broken; it would not ring; so she walked straight in and opened the door of the drawing-room.

There was no one there. Then she tried the library—now retaining merely the name, for the books were gone after the plate and spoons; then she recollected a little kind of den or morning-room at the back, where they had been wont to sit in their former days of fallen greatness.

She was all right this time; it was occupied, as she turned the door softly and looked in, unperceived at first, for a minute or two. Mattie, now very wrinkled, grey, and withered, and as thin as a lamp-post, sat with her back to the window, pouring out tea from a brown teapot with a broken spout, her whole attention riveted on the article in question, and all her care given to save herself from spilling the precious contents.

There was nothing on the table in the way of eatables but half a loaf. No sugar, no butter, graced this exceedingly frugal meal. Carrie was engaged in renovating an old gown, and it was evidently a task that went much against the grain, for she sighed heavily as she removed some pins from her mouth, and said,—

"Dear me, how soon Pauline would have made this into something like! What taste she had, and how fast she worked! I wish I had her here for half-an-hour!"

Her wish was fulfilled on the spot, and she gave a long, shrill, little scream as her half-sister at that very moment walked into the room.

"Here I am, Carrie, you see! How do you do, Matilda?" shaking hands with her petrified elder relative. "I got your letter, and thought I had better come myself."

"Oh, bless me!" ejaculated Mattie, "What a start you did give us! However, I am very glad to see you. I am glad you came. You will see for yourself how—how we are," pointing to the table with a dramatic gesture, and puckering up her face in a way that betokened tears, plenty of tears, and searching nervously for her handkerchief. "I am sure if anyone ever had a dreadful life I have had it," dissolving as she spoke.

"And he has come home!" said Pauline, seating herself. "So he was not dead, after all!"

"How," with a violent start, "how do you know?"

"I met him in the avenue. He told me. We had a quarrel, Mattie! I do not like him. It is he who has reduced you and Carrie to this!" looking round with significance.

"He has," broke in Carrie, impetuously. "He has drained us of every farthing! He has ruined us! We have not a decent gown to our backs. I've not had a new bonnet for three years. We've had to give up all society"—with a sob—"all decency to keep him in drink, cigars, and betting! He bets on the sly—he always loses! He takes every penny from us! We are all but starving! No one outside would believe to what we have been reduced! All by this man—this—" words seemingly failed her, and she burst into tears.

"I am come to help you both," said Pauline, looking from one to the other of her weeping sisters.

"I shall provide for you, but not for him. He has squandered the estates, he has reduced you to abject want, he has forged, he has cheated. He must be sent away if I am to do anything for you, Matilda. To give you an income whilst he is with you is like pouring water into sand,"—to this, Matilda made no reply beyond a low moaning sound in her handkerchief. "And here, at least, is enough to keep you going," added Pauline, taking out a very well filled portmanteau, which the two ladies regarded with greedy, longing eyes. "I will give the money to you, Carrie, as you are not his wife, and he cannot demand it. Here," handing over a roll of nice, crisp notes, "you will find a hundred and fifty pounds, and here are ten sovereigns. I need only keep two or three," emptying the purse as she spoke. "Just what will take me back! I won't trouble you to get me a bed, or put you out in any way. I am staying at the hotel just for the night."

"It was very good of you to come so soon, Pauline," said Mattie, dropping her eyes, and keeping them fixed on the notes her sister was folding up with loving fingers. "This is no place for you to stay in now. That reminds me I have something for you," rising with sudden activity, and leaving the room with fussy bustle.

"So you and your husband don't get on, I hear, Pauline," said Carrie, still stroking her sister's gift, but unable to repress this gibe. "It was not such a grand love-match on his side as we thought—eh?"

"He loved me when he married me," said Pauline.

"But he doesn't now. Isn't that true?"

"Yes, it is. I'm sorry to say, quite true."

"And whose fault is that, pray?" triumphantly.

"I cannot tell you. I believe it is the fault of his nature. He is changeable, that's all!"

"Changeable! I hear he is the greatest flirt in London; always running after every pretty new face. Always makes a point of being seen walking and driving with the new beauties. Why on earth don't you pay him out in his own coin! I should!" impressively.

Before Pauline could answer, Matilda had joined them with a large paper package in her hand.

"See, I found this," she exclaimed, breathlessly, "in your mother's little desk, long ago! I kept it," colouring guiltily, "and I forgot it. I forgot it. I came across it the other day, and you may be glad to have it."

"Glad—very glad!" returned her sister, almost snatching from her hands this token from her mother, as it undoubtedly appeared, and repressing a burning desire to tear it open and read it there and then. I shall come up again to-morrow morning, Mattie, and we will settle about business, and your having a large and regular allowance, and all that sort of thing. But now I must be going, for it's getting dark, and I promised Sophy that I would be home for dinner. Good-by!" kissing each of their withered cheeks voluntarily, for their poverty and misery had touched her not a little, and they were, after all, her own flesh and blood. "Good-by! Cheer up, Carrie! Brighter days are in store for you both!" and

with this parting speech she went quickly out of the house into the deepening even shadows, carrying her precious parcel in her pocket, and wondering ever in her own mind what it could contain. "It's in my mother's writing," she told herself, as the desire for its perusal added keenness to her footsteps, "and I did not do my little good action for nothing. See what a reward I have got for coming down to them on the spur of the moment with my spare cash! Probably otherwise I would never have got this," touching her pocket. "Virtue is not always its own reward."

Crash through the bushes to her left, a stunning, sudden, cruel blow on the back of her head—"Virtue was going to be its own reward" after all, if a recompense was needed by a dead woman!

Lorenzo Villani, of course, had laid in wait and plotted and planned. Providence—his Providence—he declared had sent this insolent, impetuous, rich young lady into his hands.

She had come alone—mysteriously, in fact. She would never be heard of. They had no people about the place—no servants in the house except a deaf old creature in the kitchen. She had offered too great a temptation to a man who knew no scruples. She was enormously rich. His wife was her next-of-kin. Her husband and she were next door to strangers—a lucky circumstance!

"She would never be missed," he said to himself, with a savage satisfaction, as he dragged her after him into the low underwood and turned out her pockets—an all but empty purse, a pig parcel, a handkerchief—"pooh!" thrusting them back minus the money, with furious exasperation—and half-a-dozen strange cat's. "She is as still as a stone," he said to himself, as he laid his ear to her lips. "It had been easily done. He would be a rich man once more! What a glow the thought sent through his brain! And she would never be missed!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Hour after hour Sophy and Hinner waited for Pauline, but no Pauline appeared, and the former came to the natural conclusion that her mistress had changed her mind, and had decided to remain at Mount Rivers all night.

Next morning arrived, but no Lady Curzon; the whole day passed, and still no Lady Curzon.

Sophy felt dull, very dull, indeed, gazing out into the little High-street (over the wire blind that insured the inmates of the best parlour at the Rivers Arms from the public gaze), but not the least uneasy.

Her mistress was with her sisters, and her last words, her last injunction, had been,—

"Stay where you are, Sophy. On no account come up to Mount Rivers until I return."

In her heart she did not wish even Sophy to see the depth of poverty to which her relations had sunk. So Sophy waited on patiently for three whole days.

She knew her mistress's eccentric impulses, and that probably she had been persuaded to remain. But why had she not sent for her, and what was more to the purpose, *her clothes*?

The maid of Lady Curzon was, of course, much expected at the inn, and bidden to tea in the privacy of the landlady's own sanctum. The said stout, garrulous landlady had a good gossip in view such as her soul loved.

She would hear, at first hand, all about Sir Philip's queer way, and whether it was he, or Lady Curzon, who did not "hit it off."

She would also hear the full details of the great Russian fortune, whose extent was debated in the village with solemn faces and bated breath; and when Sophy gave a cordial assent to the invitation, Mrs. Larks, the hostess, figuratively smacked her lips in delicious anticipation of a feast of reason and a flow of soul!

But she was doomed to disappointment. Sophy did not lose her tongue as she would wish, over the hot-buttered cakes and delicate cream-flavoured tea. In fact it was the other way about.

She, Mrs. Larks, found herself carried away

by her guest's ready appreciative sympathy, attentive manner, and confidential attitude, and was soon discoursing fluently on all the most piquant topics in the neighbourhood, including a bird's-eye view of the county town.

"Things is going to rack and ruin up at the house, as I suppose you know!" said Mrs. Lark, nodding her head solemnly. "Worse than ever. I don't know how it will end, or where!"

"Dear me, Mrs. Larks, you don't mean it; and how does it happen? My lady makes her sisters an allowance, I can assure you."

"Oh, indeed. Do you say so?" here was one item of intelligence. "But what allowance could stand him? He has ruined 'em! They were poor enough in all conscience, but since he came about three years ago, he has just stripped 'em bare as this table!" emphasising the fact with a plump, red hand.

"And who is he, num?" demanded Sophy, her curiosity not unnaturally aroused. "The Countess is a widow!"

"He says he is Count Villain's twin-brother, and, goodness knows, he is no credit to him, not that any of us ever saw the Count. We heard he was a vain, handsome young fellow, with a face like a picture, and that's what took her. He ran through the whole property in a few years. Oh! lifting her hands and eyes, "if Mr. Rivers was to come back out of his grave and see it—he that had such a pride out of the place! I give you my word the lawns were like velvet, and in the avenue there was not so much as one leaf to be seen, it was swept that carefully, and now you should just see the place for pure curiosity—it's like a wilderness. You might get a crop of grass off the drive. The chimneys is down, windows broken, pictures sold, plate, furniture, books, everything! Two big cart-loads went out of the place only nine weeks ago—furniture to brokers in London. It's little that's left; and they only keep one old woman in the kitchen, and she wouldn't stay only she would have to go on the parish. For it's little she gets to eat by all accounts!" pausing for breath.

"And what's done with the money, Mrs. Larks?" said Sophy, impressively. "What becomes of the allowance?"

"Don't I tell you, my dear," laying her hand affectionately on Sophy's knee, "that he spends it!"

"And what on! What does he do with it?"

"Well, for one thing, he drinks. My stars, how he drinks! It's brandy; a dozen bottles does no time. He has a bill here, and another at the Red Cow, as long as the street. He smokes; but that's not half. He bets on races, and goes away for two or three weeks at a time, with all their money in his pocket, and comes back with barely as much as his railway fare. He plays cards, too."

"And why do they stand it and let him drag all the money from them?" demanded Sophy, with indignation. "He's no more than a brother-in-law, and what's that? A nasty, drunken, gambling, spending foreigner! I'd send him to the right about if I was one of them. I'd let him know he would not live on me!" nodding her head with much decision.

"That may be all very well for you, my dear, talking here quietly with me, but if you saw him, with his red face and his wicked black eyes! He's a bad man, that's what he is, and those two ladies are mortally afraid of him, and just go in fear and trembling, he is that violent, and when he's had a drop, which is most always, he's like a demon. They do say," dropping her voice in a whisper, "as how he knocks 'em about and beats 'em," opening her eyes very wide.

"Merely on us!—and to think of my lady being in the house, under the very same roof with such a character! I'll go up to the house this very evening, and see when she's coming away," exclaimed Sophy, with much decision, pushing back her chair as she spoke, and dusting the crumbe from her apron.

"What brought her here at all?" demanded Mrs. Larks, pointedly. "They were none too good to her in the old times, by all accounts."

"She came to—to help them, as well as I can make out; to bring them money, and to set them

going again," returned Sophy, proud alike of her mistress's wealth, and generosity.

"Well I don't doubt but he will be civil enough and on his best behaviour if that's her errand," said Mrs. Larks, with conviction; "and if you'll be said by me you will bide here till to-morrow afternoon, as you say she told you express not to next or nigh the house, and maybe she does not like her orders disobeyed. Is she that sort?" significantly.

Sophy frankly admitted that she was, and reluctantly resigned herself to wait, being positively certain to hear from her mistress the following day without fail, she assured herself, but her assurance was vain. No note, no message arrived.

As the morning hours crept slowly, drowsily, on, and Sophy's patience ebbed at last, nothing could keep her from Mount Rivers, she declared to her hostess, emphatically, as she tied her bonnet strings with a jerk, and set out alone along the dusty highway that led to her destination; her mind was filled with impatience, curiosity, indignation, and a very slight tinge of misgiving, as she walked along between the high dust-powdered hedges at a very brisk pace.

She reached the entrance to Mount Rivers ere long, and pushed back the rusty gate, after some difficulty. It closed behind her with a clang as she commenced to walk up the grass-grown avenue.

"What a place!" she thought with contemptuous horror, being a young woman of orderly instincts. "What a thicket on either side! what overgrown trees! what a dismal atmosphere on all sides! and not only of neglect but of gloom!"

She felt depressed, in spite of herself, as she carefully picked up her dress, and walked quickly on.

Being a person who had strong nerves and not easily dismayed, she fought valiantly against a strong inward reluctance to proceed up this lonely rank avenue alone.

At last she came in sight of the house, at last she stood upon the grey stone steps, and gave a vigorous tug to the bell (which we know was broken), and no one came to the door.

Sophy had a tolerable stock of patience, and pulled and pealed at the bell, and in vain hammered on the door with her knuckles, irritably at first, and then very imperiously with not merely her knuckles but a stone.

At last—at last she heard someone coming; slow, shuffling footsteps approaching through the empty, echoing hall, and an old crone, with a face as wrinkled as a roasted apple, and a cap with a portentous frill, and a countenance as sour as vinegar opened two inches of the door, and said very irritably,—

"What's your business?"

"I am come to see Lady Curzon," returned Sophy, with a spark of fire in her eye.

"Lady who?" screamed the crone, with her hand behind her ear.

"My mistress, Lady Curzon," shouted Sophy. "She came here three days ago."

"Don't know anything about her; she is not here," making a movement as if she would slam the door.

"Then where is she?" demanded Sophy, one foot inside the hall.

"How should I know?" insolently.

"But she came here—three days ago—to see her sister and has never come back."

"Don't think it," at the top of her cracked organ; "never came here that I know of. I never see her, and never want to."

"Nonsense!" cried Sophy, out of all patience, pushing herself half way into the hall with a sudden, quick movement. "I tell you she is here, and I will see her. There's some foul play."

"Hoity toity!" screamed the old hag, backing into the hall, and who was by no means as deaf as was believed, but had her own good reasons for affecting to be as non-hearing as a stone. "That's a good joke, surely. Come in, then, and look around you, and make your mind at ease. But it's my opinion as you are mad."

"Mad yourself, you old harriard! Take me to Lady Curzon this moment, or to her sisters,

or, I give you my word, I'll go for the police!" retorted Sophy.

"The police!—he, he, he! Go for 'em—run for 'em if you please. I can't take you to Lady Curzon 'cause, for good reason, she never came here, and I can't take you to her sisters, 'cause for good reason, they ain't at home. They went away to London three days ago. What do you say to that, my beauty?"

"And is there no one in the house?" demanded Sophy, looking round, and then seating herself on the foot of the stairs with an air of resolution.

"No one! And if you don't believe me, which would be like your impudence, you can look," nodding her head portentously, folding her arms, and scratching her withered, bare elbows as she spoke.

"Then I just will look," said Sophy, suddenly jumping up and running upstairs at the top of her speed.

She knew the house well, having been there for some time before Pauline's marriage. Door after door she flung open, and displayed nothing but dust, and dilapidation of surrounding emptiness, and she called "Lady Curzon" at the top of her voice till she was nearly hoarse, but nothing answered her but a faint mocking echo that came out of old corners, and down the wide, winding staircases.

Upstairs, at any rate, there was no trace of her mistress, and the house was nearly empty. What did it all mean?

"Well, I hope as you're satisfied now!" said the charwoman, sarcastically, as she followed the bewildered Sophy from the empty dining-room to the empty drawing-room. Maybe you'd like to see the kitchen?" derisively.

"I would; and the cellars, and the pantries, and the stables," retorted the other, hotly. "I'll leave no stone unturned till I find my mistress, and that I tell you for a fact."

"Well, an' you won't find her here. Not an' if you was to pull the house down and leave it in a heap. 'Cause why—she never came here. This is the kitchen," flinging open the door with a flourish—an immense kitchen with a grand but rusty range, a little stick fire, on which was a kettle, a chair before it, on which reposed a frying-pan and two herrings.

"I was just a-going to have my dinner you see, and there ain't enough for two. I'm not a-cooking for the family, you'll perceive, and I'm a-goin' myself to-night."

"Why! Are they not coming back?" asked Sophy.

"Not as I knows on, anyhow," now placing the pan on the fire and turning over the herrings with tender care and an iron fork. "I'm not a-cooking back. I'd rather go into the house. There ain't no drinkin' and swearin' and brawlin' there, and the food's as good, anyhow!"

"Where are they gone to—the ladies?" persisted Sophy.

"Lark a-mercy! how can I tell you! They just packed up their things—and precious little they had—in two bags, and sent for me, and told me they was going for awhile on important business, and I was to give up the key to Mr. Jones, the sexton, when I'd sorted up the place a bit, and locked the house and barred the windows."

"Now you have it all pat, my dear," turning a herring as she spoke, "and I hope you're feelin' easier in your mind, a-comin' and banging down the front door with a pavin' stone, and a-askin' for Lady Curzon, and tearing through the house like a madwoman, and lookin' for what never was here. 'Cause why!—she never came here! Did anyone ever know such games? I hope as you satisfied, miss! I do hope as how you are feelin' better and easier in your mind!" with would-be withering irony.

"Mark me, old woman," said Sophy, laying her hand fiercely on that person's shoulder; "if anything has happened to my young lady, I'll see you hanged for it with these two eyes, as sure as my name is Sophia Jane Johnson," and, emphasising this warning with a little push, which caused the frying-pan to oscillate in an alarming manner.

(To be continued.)

COURTNEY'S CHOICE.

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(Continued from page 441.)

"She has gone to some old friend, you may be sure; probably at some distance where she would not be likely to meet any of her former acquaintances."

"But to whom could she go? I know of no one, unless, indeed—ah! I have it, the Carstairs. Mrs. Carstairs was always very fond of her, and Dublin would seem to her like the end of the world. I will go by the first train in the morning."

They wished each other good-night, and Courtney went back to his hotel feeling comparatively easy about Freda, but his heart filled with this new sorrow.

After all, perhaps, he did not suffer so much as many men in his position would have done. He had never known the real sweetness of a mother's love. That sacred tie which binds with its golden links the mother's heart to that of her child, had never existed in Courtney's case; its place had been supplied by pride and a towering ambition.

Still his grief was very real nevertheless, and for a long time he lay awake tossing restlessly to and fro, until at length fatigued with his long journey he fell into a troubled slumber.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. CARSTAIRS was a widow with two daughters, Eva and Kathleen, handsome lively girls about Freda's age, and exceedingly popular in Dublin society. She possessed a comfortable income in addition to a large house in Wellesley-square, in the drawing-room of which, on the afternoon following Courtney's arrival in England, they were all assembled.

"Do you know, Freda, I am becoming quite anxious about you?" Mrs. Carstairs was saying, "you are getting thin and pale, and seem as if you were determined to worry yourself to death. I do wish you would go out with the girls this afternoon."

"Yes! do come, there's a dear," chimed in Kathleen, "it will freshen you up and put a few roses in your cheeks; staying in the house has made you look quite ill."

Freda glanced at the girl with a wan smile.

"You are very good to me, Katie, dear," she said; "but, indeed, I would rather not go out, just yet; I do not care to see people, the noise makes my head ache."

"But, just for once," urged Mrs. Carstairs, "go this afternoon, I will not press you afterwards, if you find the strain on your nerves too great."

Very reluctantly, Freda yielded to the solicitations of her hostess, and accompanied Kathleen and her sister on their round of afternoon visits.

As Mrs. Carstairs had said she was really becoming very anxious about her young friend, whose health and spirits appeared to grow worse every day. Freda had not confided more than the outline of her story to her friend, but the latter's knowledge of Mrs. Colthrop enabled her to guess, pretty accurately, how the girl had been made to suffer.

What she could not understand was Courtney's behaviour, which puzzled her considerably.

"It is altogether unlike him," she said to herself, "he appeared so devoted to her, when we were in London; there must have been some underhand influence at work."

The girls had been gone about an hour, when a cat stopped before the house in Wellesley-square, and directly afterwards a servant brought in a card on which was inscribed the name—"Courtney Colthrop."

"I will see the gentleman here," exclaimed Mrs. Carstairs, and as Courtney entered she rose to receive him.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Colthrop, I had no idea that you were on our side of the channel."

Courtney noted the coldness of her greeting, and it made him all the more anxious to explain the object of his visit.

"I have come expressly to see my cousin," he said, awkwardly, "I know she is staying with you as I caught a glimpse of her in the city with your daughters."

"Yes," stily, "Freda is at present under my care, and from what I can gather, I do not think an interview with her can be of service to either of you."

Courtney flushed hotly.

"You are mistaken, dear Mrs. Carstairs," he said, earnestly, "indeed you are. There has been some misunderstanding; some unfortunate blunder which I wish to clear up. Do not deny me this interview, all my future happiness depends upon it. You know I love her; give me the opportunity to ask her to be my wife. Should she refuse I will go away quietly and trouble you no further."

"And Helen Faudell?"

He flushed again, angrily this time.

"Helen Faudell is nothing to me, more than a simple friend."

"Then the rumour of your engagement is false?"

"Absolutely; there is not a word of truth in it."

Mrs. Carstairs was impressed by the young man's evident earnestness and sincerity.

"You will find the poor child sadly altered," she said; and he nodded gloomily. The vision of the sad worn face was even then before his eyes. Presently his hostess led him into another room.

"The girls will be back shortly," she explained, "and I will send her to you."

He bowed silently and Mrs. Carstairs withdrew in order to prepare Freda for the coming interview.

"Freda!"

"Courtney!"

For the moment all else was forgotten. The suffering and sorrow—the agony of doubt—the hopeless questionings; all alike were swallowed up in the supreme happiness of being once more together. The network of intrigue was brushed aside as lightly as if it had been some gossamer thread, and they stood locked in a fond embrace.

"My poor darling," he murmured softly, as he gazed at the wasted cheeks, "how terribly you have suffered. But it is over now, is it not, sweet one? We will be married, you and I, and the past shall be forgotten, nothing now can ever come between us. I will make you so happy, my darling. My love shall bring back the colour to your cheeks, the lustre to your eyes. Freda, do you guess, I wonder, how passionately I love you and have loved you always. We must not wait longer, dear, I must take you into my keeping at once. Henceforth, my life is devoted to you."

He did not hint at his mother's treachery, but she was content without an explanation. She knew now as she felt his strong arms around her, and as she gazed into the loved face, that she had never really doubted his loyalty, even when in the depths of despair she would have welcomed death as a means of escape from her misery.

When, a little later, he led her into the drawing-room, her face was covered with rosy blushes, and she could scarcely see through the mist of happy tears.

"Mrs. Carstairs," he said proudly, "allow me to present to you my affianced wife."

The girl threw her arms round her friend's neck, and laid her head upon her bosom.

"I am so happy," she whispered shyly, and the older lady kissed the upturned face.

Leaving the two together, he turned to Kathleen and Eva, who were eager in their congratulations.

It was long since Freda had spent such a happy evening, and more than once during the night she awakened with a start to ask herself if it was not all a wild phantasy of the brain.

The next morning Courtney held a long conversation with Mrs. Carstairs, at which it was decided that the marriage should take place quietly from her house, with Eva and Kathleen for the bridesmaids, and that after the wedding,

he should take his wife away to the shores of the Mediterranean until the summer.

There yet remained one thing for him to do, and his brow clouded at the thought. He must see his mother and let her know that he had discovered everything.

It was a painful task, but he could not shrink it, so after bidding Freda and her friends a temporary farewell, he once more returned to England.

All this time Mrs. Colthrop had been exulting in the fancied success of her plans. Freda had disappeared completely.

Courtney she thought was still at Mentone, constantly thrown into Helen's society; in short, all was going precisely as she would have wished.

The unexpected sight of Courtney himself walking sharply along the broad carriage drive in the direction of the house, disconcerted her, and her annoyance was plainly visible in her face.

"You received my letter?" she asked, questioningly, as he entered the room in which she sat.

"Yes," gravely, "that is why I am here."

"But this is sheer folly; there was no necessity for your return; I told you I would make every inquiry about the girl. What more can you do?"

"I have already done more. I have found her and talked with her."

Something in the tone of his voice caused her to glance up sharply; she had never heard him speak in that way before.

What had happened? Had he discovered anything? For the first time in her life she felt nervous and at a loss.

For a little time there was perfect silence. Mrs. Colthrop would not speak and her son was trying apparently in vain to find words in which to express himself.

"Mother," he said at last, and there was an unmistakable ring of pain in his voice, "I know all. May Heaven forgive you."

Never since the early days of her girlhood, save perhaps on that one occasion when Frank Donbigh brought his little daughter to her London house, had Adeline Colthrop's heart been really touched.

Now, however, her hitherto impenetrable armour of pride and selfishness was pierced through and through, and she wept like a child.

"Oh, my boy, my brave beautiful boy," she sobbed, "do not you turn against me. I have done wrong, but it was for your sake. I acted as I thought in your interests. Forgive me, Courtney, forgive me," she cried wildly, "unless you wish to see me die!"

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Mother," he said sorrowfully, "you have done a grievous injury; you have nearly wrecked Freda's life and mine, but let the future atone for the past, and all shall be forgotten. We are to be married shortly, and I am going to take her to Italy. She does not know the truth, she need never know. Write to her kindly now, and on our return welcome her not only as my wife, but as your daughter."

"I will, Courtney, indeed—I indeed I will," the unhappy woman sobbed earnestly, "I will devote my life to making her happy."

Then he led her gently to her room for the excitement had exhausted her energies, and she needed rest.

Courtney remained a few days longer in England in order to complete his arrangements, and then returned to Dublin, where he and Freda were quietly married.

On the eve before the wedding there arrived a magnificent necklace of pearls, and a little note from Briancourt. Tears stood in the girl's eyes as she read the few brief words,—

"FREDA," Mrs. Colthrop wrote, "will you accept my offering? If you do I shall regard it as a sign that some day you will forgive me, and try to look upon me, not as your aunt, but as your mother. "ADELINE."

She showed it to Courtney.

"You will keep it, darling," he said, "it is an earnest of our future happiness," and she acquiesced willingly.

For the next few months they wandered together through the beautiful cities of sunny Italy, and as one day of perfect happiness succeeded another, Freda's health and spirits returned, and she became once again the merry, light-hearted girl she had been in the days gone by.

One more picture we will draw before the curtain finally drops.

It is a glorious day in the early part of June, and Brancourt is looking its best. The gates are thrown wide open, and there is an air of bustle and activity to which the place has long been a stranger.

The hall door is open, and at the top of the broad flight of steps, a lady, still in the prime of life is standing and gazing eagerly and expectantly down the carriage drive.

It is Mrs. Colthrop and her beautiful face has gained an added charm since we last saw her. There is a womanly softness, a tender expression, which is a new characteristic, and is the outward sign that the old crust of pride and selfishness has been cast aside for ever.

Presently her face lights up with a wondrously sweet smile, for she has caught the sound of carriage wheels and knows that Courtney and Freda have come home.

Now they appear in sight throwing her bright joyous smiles, and now Courtney jumps from the carriage to hand out with lover-like gallantry, his honey, winsome wife.

Very sweet and girlish Freda looks in her dainty summer costume, and as they approach, the elder lady admits to herself that Courtney has made a wise choice.

"Freda, my child," she whispers, as the girl stands before her, "have you forgiven?" and a delicious tremor fills her heart at Freda's reply.

"Mother, hush," says Courtney's wife, "not another word. In my happiness I remember nothing, but that henceforth I am your daughter."

And so together they pass into the old house, the scene of Adeline Colthrop's sin, and of Freda's misery, hallowed now by a perfect reconciliation, and by a complete blotting out of the dead past.

There as the years rolled on they lived happy joyous lives, and when in the fulness of time Adeline lay peacefully dying, she placed her hand in Freda's and whispered softly,—

"Thank Heaven, my darling, that I failed in my attempt to alter 'Courtney's Choice.'"

[THE END.]

ONE of the most remarkable timber belts in the world stands in Humboldt and Mendocino Counties, California. It embraces 4,125 square miles, containing 132,000,000,000 feet of timber. With the aid of the microscope scientists have found the age of some of these trees to be nearly three thousand years. Some of the fallen trees have remained where they fell for eight hundred to one thousand years, so it is estimated, with scarcely any deterioration of the wood.

MARRIAGE brokers are a regular institution in Italy. In Genoa there are regular marriage brokers, who have pocket-books filled with the names of the marriageable girls of the different classes, with notes of their figures, personal attractions, fortune and other circumstances. These brokers go about endeavouring to arrange connections in the same off-hand mercantile manner which they would bring to bear upon a purely business transaction, and when they succeed they get a commission of two or three per cent. upon the portion, with such extras or bonuses as may be voluntarily bestowed by the party. Marriage at Genoa is thus oftentimes simply a matter of business calculation, generally settled by the parent or relations, who often draw up the contract before the parties have seen one another, and it is only when everything else is arranged, and a few days previous to the marriage ceremony, that the future husband is introduced to his partner for life. Should he find fault with her manner or appearance, he may annul the contract, on condition of defraying brokerage, and any other expenses incurred.

FACETIÆ.

MRS. MCSTINGER (severely): "A man who commits bigamy ought to be hanged." Mr. McS.: "To be sure. Put him out of his misery."

TEACHER: "You say there are six senses? Why, I have only five." Scholar: "I know it, sir. The sixth one is common-sense."

"I want a hair cut," said the middle-aged man, as he dropped into the barber's chair. "Yes, sir," was the answer; "which one?"

POTTER: "Why didn't you join our shooting party?" Blair: "Well, I'm not much of a sportsman, and I was afraid you might make game of me."

SHE: "I have got four new wrinkles in my face since I married you." He: "Too bad! I presume it comes from worrying over milliners' bills which I can't pay."

HE (very conceited): "I don't think I should like to marry any girl unless I knew she was of a self-sacrificing nature." She: "But wouldn't that prove it?"

MISTRESS: "Didn't the ladies who called leave cards?" Carlotta: "They wanted to, ma'am, but I told them you had plenty of your own, and better, too."

WHEN you find two women conversing to-day with earnestness, if not afraid,

If you listen, you'll surely hear one of them say, "And how are you having it made?"

MAGISTRATE: "Have you any means of support?" Shabby Gentleman: "I don't quite understand you." "Have you any profession by which you can make a living?" "No, sir; I'm an artist."

"LEND your son rather young to join the army!" said a recruiting sergeant to an old lady who brought a boy of fourteen to him to enlist. "Why, no," she replied; "you see I want him to join the infantry."

MRS. F.: "Your former servant girl wants me to hire her. Is she honest and reliable?" Dressmaker: "I can't say. I have sent her to you with your bill five or six times, but she has never brought me back my money."

JACK (who has proposed): "It strikes me it takes you a long time to decide." Daisy: "I know. And I've concluded to wear a demi-train of white chiffon over white silk, and to have no bridesmaids."

WILLIS: "When my wife makes me a present it is sure to be something that will last." Wallace: "My wife is just like that, too. Five years ago she made me a present of one hundred cigars, and I have ninety-nine of them yet."

"MOTHER," said an urchin to the man who was driving a very poor horse, "do you want me to hold 'im?" "No; this horse won't run away." "I didn't mean hold 'im fast, so he won't run away. I mean hold 'im up, so he won't drop."

MR. CALLER: "Miss Antique, I have been wanting to ask you something for some time." Miss Antique (blushing): "You—you may ask it." Mr. Caller: "My mother wants to know if you are not the Isabel Antique she used to go to school with?"

MAUD: "He has bought you a pair of handsome embroidered slippers, your mother says; did you give him your size?" Louise: "No." Maud: "How did he get it, then?" Louise: "Get it! Why, he has been at my feet for a year."

MOTHER: "You can't stay in this hot city. Why don't you tell your husband you must go to a summer resort?" Bride: "I—I don't dare." "Why not?" "If he says 'no,' I will be miserable because I can't go, and if he says 'yes' I will be miserable because he can live without me."

He came home from his daily grind at the office, and falling into a chair, said, "What have you got to read? I'm just in the mood for reading something sensational and startling—something that will make my hair stand on end." To which his other half responded, sweetly, "Here's the bill for my new dress, darling."

HUSBAND: "Now, I think this is going too far. You promised me you would countermand your order for that dress." Wife: "I wrote to the firm that very day." "But here is the dress and the bill for it—enough to bankrupt me almost. How do you explain that?" "I gave you the letter, and suppose you forgot to post it, as usual."

At a dance in Dublin a young briefless barrister met a lady of exalted position, with whom he was so much smitten that before the week was out he called upon her father to ask for her hand. The old man began proceedings by asking what prospects he had, to which the barrister replied, "Well, none at present; but when my uncle dies—" "Ah, when your uncle dies," replied the father, as he rang the bell. "Here, John, show this gentleman out till his uncle dies."

"Sir," said a grocer, addressing a customer, "do you remember that barrel of oranges you ordered some time ago?" "Oh, yes, I remember it." "I suppose so; but I don't remember that you ever paid for it." "My dear sir, I am not responsible for your bad memory. I have remembered my part of it. Memory is a peculiar faculty, and is susceptible of great cultivation. Lord Macaulay could repeat Milton's 'Paradise Lost' by heart. Well, good morning."

LANDLADY (deferentially): "Mr. Smith, do you not suppose that the first steamboat created much surprise among the fish when it was first launched?" Smith (curly): "I can't say, madam, whether it did or not." Landlady: "Oh, I thought from the way you eyed the fish before you, that you might acquire some information on that point." Smith (the malicious villain): "Very likely, marm—very likely; but it's my opinion, marm, that this fish left its native element before steamboats were invented."

CAPTAIN: "I must confess, Pat, that your action in the engagement yesterday surprised me." Pat: "An' what's the reason o' that, captain, dear?" "Reason enough, Pat. Didn't you promise me you'd be in the thickest of the fight, and didn't I catch you actually running away, you rascal?" "Runnin' away, is it? 'Dade, captain, but ye deavys yerself. It was in remembrance of my promise, sor, that Oi was runnin' around troynin' to find out just where the fight was the thickest, so Oi was."

A FEW years ago, in a garrison town in the South of England, a recently-promoted sergeant-major, an Irishman by birth, was walking on the parade-ground of another regiment when he was stopped by a sentry and asked not to walk on the grass. "Do you know who I am, sir?" said the sergeant-major, swelling with pomposity. "No, sir," replied the soldier, "but I know what rank you hold: you are a sergeant-major." "Who gave you these orders?" "The colonel of my regiment, sir." "Show me your orders," commanded the officer. "My orders are verbal, sir." "Show me your verbal orders!"

A YOUNG and newly-married couple were entertaining their friends, and among the guests was one whose continued rudeness made him extremely objectionable to the rest of the company. His conduct, although most unbearable, was put up with for some time, until at supper he held up on his fork a piece of meat which had been served to him, and in a vein of intended humour he looked round, and remarked, "Is this pig?" This immediately drew forth the remark from a quiet-looking individual sitting at the other end of the table, "Which end of the fork do you refer to?"

He was a commercial traveller of the more flashy type, and had just finished telling a startling story to his newly-made acquaintance in the car. "That reminds me of one of Munchausen's yarns," remarked the victim, for want of something better to say. "Munchausen? Who is he?" "Why, don't you know about him? He is the most colossal example of mendacity that civilization has produced." A brief, painful silence ensued, which was broken by the traveller in a tone that was almost timid. "Excuse me, my friend," he said, "if I seem inquisitive. But would you mind telling me what house he travels for?"

SOCIETY.

SIR HENRY PONSONBY will accompany the Court to Balmoral, but is to stay there for only a fortnight, after which he will take his usual autumn holiday of five weeks.

THE British Museum has received, as a gift from Sir Augustus Franks, a prayer-book of Queen Elizabeth, which is very beautifully bound in gold and enamel, and is a national treasure.

PRINCE and Princess Frederick Charles of Hesse are coming to England at the end of this month, and they will be the guests of the Queen at Balmoral for two or three weeks.

THE Duchess of York and the Duchess of Teck will stay for exactly four weeks at Moritz. The Duchess of York will then return to England, arriving in London on September 6th, and the Duchess of Teck is going to pay some visits in Germany.

THE Princess of Wales and her daughters will be the guests of the Emperor and Empress of Russia for some weeks, after which they are going to Denmark. The Princess of Wales has not visited Russia since January 1874, when she went to St. Petersburg with the Prince for the marriage of the Duke of Edinburgh.

THE Czarevitch went quite out of the beaten track in the selection of the numerous presents he sent to those from whom he met with official attention during his stay in England. The district superintendent of the Great Western Railway at Paddington, has just received through Colonel Byng a magnificent inkstand of gold and platinum in the shape of a Russian cavalry helmet, and of unmistakably Russian manufacture. The Austrian Herr Apparent's gifts consisted chiefly of small sapphire pins.

THE Prince of Wales arrived at Homburg about the 15th, for a stay of three weeks after which H.R.H. will pay visits to the Duke and Duchess of Coburg at Reinhardsbrunn, and to the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Saxe-Weimar at Wilhelmshausen, near Eisenach, before returning to England. The Prince is to go to Scotland about the middle of September, on his annual visit to the Duke and Duchess of Fife at Balmoral, when there will be a series of deer drives in Mar Forest. His Royal Highness hopes to be at Newmarket for the Second October and Houghton Meetings.

THE Duke and Duchess of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha intend visiting the King and Queen of Wurtemberg early in this autumn, when his Majesty William the Second will be invested with the Order of the Garter by the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha on behalf of the Queen. His Majesty has already been made a Knight of the Garter, but has not yet been invested with the insignia. He succeeded to the throne nearly three years ago, and is a fine-looking man in his forty-fifth year. His Majesty has one daughter by his first marriage, who is not yet seventeen. The King, after being a widower for four years, married Princess Charlotte of Schaumburg-Lippe, who is now Queen of Wurtemberg, but has no children. The King and Queen have been married for eight years. The Queen is a very handsome woman and their Majesties are very popular.

ALTHOUGH the health of the youthful King of Spain has happily greatly improved during the past few years, his mother, the Queen-Regent, is naturally extremely careful not to allow his strength to be over-taxed by too severe a course of study. Such precautions are all the more necessary as her little son possesses an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and enjoys his lessons thoroughly instead of shirking them, as most boys of his age are apt to do. The Queen, however, is very anxious he should make good progress in her mother-tongue, and as she dreads the terrible intricacies of the German language proving too hard for him, she has written a simple grammar and a reading-book for his express use. The lessons in the latter consist principally of short verses which are easily committed to memory. These the young monarch delights in, for he is very quick to learn, besides being industrious.

STATISTICS.

IRELAND's linen industry employs one hundred thousand persons.

THE residences situated in London are worth £700,000,000.

AT least £144,000,000 worth of British property is always on the sea.

THE bones and muscles of the human body are capable of over 1,200 different motions.

FIVE men can easily hold down a lion, but nine are required to hold a tiger.

ACCORDING to the insanity returns, 16 cases in 1,000 are caused by love affairs.

GEMS.

HE that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.

THE gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trial.

NO soul is desolate as long as there is a human being for whom it can feel, trust, and reverence.

A MAN no sooner gets old enough to know how to talk well than he also learns the value of not talking at all.

NARROW criticism will give place to generous appreciation when we learn to lift our thoughts from the single faults which we are so swift to condemn to the whole character, of which we know so little.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

BOUCHEES OF EGGS.—Bake some puff paste patty-cases large enough to contain one egg each. When sufficiently baked, take out the inside and a few minutes before sending to table, break one egg, well seasoned, in each of the cases; put them in the oven, and, when the eggs are set, dish up on a napkin and serve.

PARKIN BISCUITS.—Quarter pound of flour, quarter pound oatmeal, quarter pound treacle, one ounce butter or lard, one ounce sugar, three-quarters teaspoonful baking soda, one teaspoon ginger. Mix all the dry things in a basin, and melt the treacle and butter together, and stir them in among the dry things. Mix well and take it up in pieces. Roll these round, then flatten them in the hand, and put them on an oven tin. Stick half an almond on the top, and bake gently till firm. Fine oatmeal is best.

GINGER BREAD.—One and a half pounds of flour, one teaspoonful soda, six ounces of butter, half teaspoonful cream of tartar, half pound of treacle, one teaspoonful ground ginger, quarter pound sugar, one teaspoonful allspice, one teaspoonful cinnamon. Rub the soda and cream of tartar into the flour, then rub in the butter and add the spices, melt the sugar and treacle together, with about two teaspoonfuls of boiling water, stir altogether, pour over the other things, and put into a buttered tin. Bake in a moderate oven for one hour and a half.

BANANAS SERVED COLD.—Cut a few bananas straight down the middle, and then cut them lengthwise into strips. Put them in layers with slices of orange in a glass dish, sprinkling caster sugar plentifully over each layer. Lay aside for two hours, and then serve with a tablespoonful of Maraschino poured over the whole. Ground ginger and strips of angelica may be added. An excellent salad is made out of cut bananas, served in red currant or blackberry syrup. Another good salad is of bananas, tinned apricots, and French preserved plums; or again, of bananas, grapes, slices of apple, pear, lemon, orange, green figs, and blackberries, with the juices and pulp of pomegranates. Maraschino is always an improvement to a banana salad.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE best bricks in the world are made by the tribes of Central Asia.

CIVILIZATION is slowly penetrating into the interior of Africa.

FOOTBALL was a crime in England during the reign of Henry VIII.

THE Rock of Gibraltar is an exact representation of a lion lying in a resting position.

THE Kangaroo readily leaps from sixty to seventy feet. The highest recorded leap of a horse is thirty-seven feet.

MOSS grows thickest on the north side of hills, and a sun-exposed tree has its largest limbs on the south side.

THE south-west wind is the most prevalent in England. It blows on almost twice as many days in every year as every other wind.

THERM is a way of making artificial ice in France so that when a big square of it is violently tapped, it separates into small and perfect cubes.

AT the funeral of an unmarried woman in Brazil, scarlet is the mourning hue. The coffin, the hearse, the trappings of the horses, and the livery of the driver must be scarlet.

COCKROACHES are never wittingly slain by Chinamen. They consider them sacred insects, and think it portends ill luck to step on them. As they never make any effort to exterminate them, the Chinese quarters are usually overrun with these pests.

AT the present time the Australian aborigines are the lowest known species of humanity. They have little or no reasoning faculties, and their only idea of a higher power is gained through fear. They are chocolate-coloured, wear little clothing, and their weapons are crudely made from wood.

THE Bon Marche of Paris has the largest kitchen in the world. There are fifty frying-pans, each large enough to hold three hundred cutlets at a time. The smallest kettle contains a hundred quarts, and the largest five hundred. Each dish for baking potatoes holds two hundred and twenty-five pounds.

EVEN the most expert tree chopper or sawyer cannot compete in point of time with the electrical process of felling trees. The method is simple. A platinum wire is stretched between two poles, and made incandescent. No matter how large the tree in diameter, the wire will burn through it, and in about one-eighth of the time it would take to saw it through.

THE flesh of the giraffe is said to be excellent—second indeed to only two or three game animals in all Africa. It is not unlike veal with a game flavour; there is a slight aromatic taste, stronger at certain seasons than others—attributable mainly to the acacia leaves on which the animal feeds—but it is not unpleasant. The meat of a fat young cow is delicious, and comparable, it is stated, to almost any game dish in the world. In bulk of meat a mature giraffe is considered in South Africa as about the equivalent of two oxen. The tongue—from eighteen inches to twenty-one inches in length—is a real delicacy; and, as to the marrow-bones of a giraffe, there is no other luxury in Africa comparable to them. They furnish banquets for kings and princes.

AN Arab—meaning a tent-dweller, in an equine sense, for the town-dweller is no Arab—loves first and above all his horse. Next he loves his fire-arm. Next to his gun he loves his eldest son. Last comes his wife—or one of his wives, perhaps. Daughters don't count. The Arab doesn't take the trouble to count them unless in so far as they minister to his comfort, dietetic or otherwise. Until some neighbour comes along and proposes to marry, in other words to make a still worse slave of one of them, she is only a chattel—a soulless thing. And yet she is said to be a pretty, amiable, helpful being—said to be, for no cut by any hap ever chances to cast his eyes on one worth seeing. This disregard for women, be it said to their honour, does not always apply to the Bedouins of the Syrian and Arabian deserts.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

A. C.—Advertise in the daily papers.

CARMEL.—A druggist will measure the dose.

E. S.—There is no such chance as you describe.

MINOR.—A person under age cannot make a will.

CONFIDENTIAL READER.—Take your pictures to a proper chemist.

O. A.—None to our knowledge, but you had better ask a bookseller.

K. T.—*Desert* is the name of a parish in South Warwickshire.

PUZZLED.—"Fajera toujours" means "hope over" or "hope always."

ANXIOUS.—She should get the consent of one parent before under age.

DOUBTFUL ONE.—Apply to the superintendent of police for your district.

B. D.—Merchants quote in rupees at current rate, or in pounds sterling.

QUINQUARY.—Asphalt is taken from a lake of pitch in the Island of Trinidad.

ONE IN TROUBLE.—It is for the judge to say whether you can pay by instalments or not.

K. G.—Lord Wolsley is an Irishman, and Lord Roberts is an Anglo-Indian.

JOHANNES.—John of Great's is the northernmost point of the main land of Scotland.

ROBERT.—An employer cannot dismiss an apprentice before his time has expired.

T. O.—Orlando is Italian, signifying the counsel for the people or the country.

A. J. B.—Salome was common among the Hebrews, and means the perfect one.

WILL.—The ranks are recruited from corps of telegraph messengers and country runners.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—Divorce cases are tried only in the Divorce Court, in London.

ELTON LAM.—Twenty-one days' notice must be given to the registrar for your district.

ANXIOUS QUERENT.—A divorce can only be obtained through the Divorce Court in London.

ROLAND.—We are not able to explain, not knowing the particular company to which you refer.

SLAVEY.—Usually when wages are paid weekly, a week's notice is required on either side.

JEANIE DEANE.—The Queen is descended from the British Royal Stewarts through German parentage.

STREVENSON.—Geography as a science was introduced into Europe by the Moors in 1240.

EMMA.—Strip the paint off or get another cage. All painted cages are bad for birds.

MAISON.—A drop of oil and a feather will do away with the creaking in a door or creaking chair.

J. S. D.—Mr. Cleveland, President of the United States, is an American by birth, but is of English descent.

OLD READER.—Look in an Army List; it would require a column to set forth all corps that bear the designation.

ANSEY ONE.—As you do not state his reason for refusing to serve you, it is impossible to say whether he was justified or not.

EDWIN.—If the dog was known to be savage, the owner is liable, and has probably admitted liability in any case by giving money.

PLUMBER.—Caster oil plant or bunches of green walnut leaves are often found to have excellent effect in driving them away.

CHARLIE AND BESSIE.—The names must be put up in each of the parishes in which the parties reside; and the marriage must take place in one of the parishes.

BARBARICA.—Well rub the garment with a small sponge dipped in benzoline, and take care not to do it near a light, as it is very inflammable.

D. G. E.—In case of a parent receiving outdoor relief a son may be required to contribute towards the expenses incurred by the guardians.

B. D.—You can register musical copyrights at Stationers' Hall, where on personal application, you will obtain all the information you ask.

CUSHEMAY.—Cayenne pepper mixed with soft food is given to hens to stimulate their egg-laying. A teaspoonful of pepper will suffice for a pair of fowls.

ONE IN DISTRESS.—You would be liable to pay what you are able, which the magistrate must decide after hearing all that you have to say of your own means.

RUMORS.—To cure harness sores on horses, it is recommended to rub on them the ashes of burned leather. Repeat the application until the cure is effected.

MOTHER OF SIX.—For ordinary scalds and burns, we know of nothing better than common baking soda, which is also used for bites and stings of insects. It is said to cure eruptions caused by poisonous ivy. Apply the soda either dry or wet.

SOLDIER.—1. We really can not say as no statistics are published. 2. This would be a question of taste more than anything else, if you had asked which one regiment it would have been easier to answer.

ARNET.—We should think it would have a value beyond its use. The *Ketchup* and *Mart*, the office of which is in the Strand, London, would be a good medium for advertising it.

WONDERING SON.—Poets took their name from the fact that in former times the footways of London streets were separated from the drives by a line of posts, on which advertisements were displayed.

A FOUR YEARS' READER.—Working men's clubs are private establishments, not under greater restraints than private dwelling-houses, and can open and shut when they please, to admit members only.

YOUNG HOUSEWIFE.—After a room has been newly-papored, there should be ample opportunity given the paper to dry upon the walls before a fire is built in the apartment.

THE IRON HORSE.

No song is mine of Arab steed—
My course is of nobler blood,
And clearer limb and swifter speed,
And greater strength and hardihood
Than ever cantered wild and free
Across the plains of Araby.

Go search the level desert land
From Sans on to Samarcand—
Wherever Persian prince has been
Or Derrish, Sheik or Bedouin,
And I defy you there to point
Me out a steed the half so fine—
From tip of ear to pastern-joint—
As this old iron horse of mine.
You do not know what beauty is—
You do not know what gentleness
His answer is to my caress!

Why, look upon this gift of his!—
A touch upon his iron rein—
His moves with such a stately grace
The sunlight on his burnished mane
Is barely shaken in its place;
And at a touch he changes pace,
And, gliding backward, stops again.

And talk of mettles! Ah, my friend,
Such passion smoulders in his breast
That when awakened it will send
A thrill of rapture wilder than
For palpitated heart of Man
When flaming at its mightiest.
And there's a fierceness in his ire—
A maddened majesty that leaps
Along his veins in blood of fire,
Until the path his vision sweeps
Springs out behind him like a thread
Unreel'd from the reel of time.
As, wheeling on his course sublime,
The earth revolves beneath his tread.

Then stretch away, my gallant steed!
Thy mission is a noble one;
You bear the father to the son,
And sweet relief to bitter need;
You bear the stranger to his friends;
You bear the pilgrim to the shrine,
And back again the prayer he sends
That God will prosper us and mine.
The star that on thy forehead gleams
Has blossomed in thy brightest dreams.

Then speed thee on thy glorious race!
The mother waits thy ringing pace;
The father leans an anxious ear
The thunder of thy hoofs to hear;
The lower listens, far away,
To catch thy keen exultant neigh;
And, where thy breathings roll and rise,
The husband strains his eager eyes,
And laugh of wife and baby glees
Ring out to greet and welcome thee.
Then stretch away! and when at last
The master's hand shall gently check
Thy mighty speed, and hold thee fast,
The world will put thee on the neck.

J. W. B.

FRED.—Only experienced men are taken, and it would be necessary that you should serve an apprenticeship to it either in a bolshered on land or in a cargo or passenger boat.

ANXIOUS HENRY.—Apply to the directors of the several railway companies. The duties are more arduous and responsible and more dangerous than you seem aware of.

PERPLEXED ONE.—The meaning of the monogram, "IHS," sometimes seen on the Communion cloths &c., is *Iesus Hominum Salvator*—"Jesus the Saviour of Mankind."

KATHLEEN.—Boil hay or potato paring for an hour in the boiler, then rub it over with sand. If very bad, boil a second time and empty, rub with sand once more, then boil clean water in it.

MARY THE MAID OF THE IRON.—Matting should never be washed with anything but salt and water—a pint of salt to half a pailful of soft water moderately warm. Dry quickly with a soft cloth.

HOUSEWIFE.—Never allow meat to be placed directly on the ice, as the water draws out the juices; it is even worse to lay it on there wrapped in paper. It should always be laid in a clean porcelain vessel.

PRYLLIS.—Benzine rubbed in will sometimes remove it, or fat applied to the stain. Afterwards rub soap well in, allow it to remain for five or six minutes and then wash out, first with oil of turpentine, afterwards with hot water.

ONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.—There are persons who are said to be very wise who believe to some extent in the influence of the moon on the growth of plants. But there are no absolutely substantial reasons for their belief, and many more do not credit such things at all.

A DUBIOUS LOVER.—After you have carefully gone over the circumstances of your life with the young lady, you will be a much better judge of the situation than anybody else. Our advice to you is, if she should hesitate to accept the situation, to give the young lady up.

PHIL.—To remove ink from paper, make a solution of two drachms of musate of tin in four drachms of water. Apply this with a camel hair brush sparingly till the writing disappears. Well clean the solution afterwards from the paper with a wet sponge and dry with blotting paper.

G. O. M.—Linden is the name in all Germanic languages for trees of the genus *Tilia*; its origin, it is stated, being obscure. The same trees are called lime, and by the old English authors linc or line. They are called in Northern Europe bass trees, and in the United States Linden, lime, and basswood. The botanical name *Tilia* is the ancient Latin one.

REGULAR READER.—When freshly stained ink may be removed by wetting in milk, take some cotton wool and sop up as much of the ink as possible; then take fresh cotton wool and wet it in milk, and sop it up carefully, not allowing it to spread. When the ink is hardened salts of lemon or sorrel will remove it as well as if it were cotton; or lemon juice will do.

CLARICE.—Cheap goods seldom keep the colour; we can only recommend washing them in a soap lather, when it has cooled to tepid; use no soda or soap powders. Avoid rubbing on soap as much as possible, cleansing if you can by drawing to and fro through the lather. Get the washing through quickly and rinse at once.

OSCAR C.—Agnosticism is a word which Professor Huxley introduced into the English language in 1869. The term, it is stated, was suggested to him by the inscription in Greek, "To the Unknown God," which the Apostle Paul saw on an Athenian altar, as recorded in Acts xviii. 22. It implies the doctrine that man does not know anything about spiritual existence, whether divine or human or about a future life.

UNHAPPY MARK.—When next you meet the young man, smile pleasantly and speak to him as though nothing had happened. It is very foolish for young people to get vexed at each other and refuse to speak. Such nonsense should have been outgrown with child's play. Be frank and sincere, and try to be always generous, just and steadfast in all friendships, and avoid everything petty and narrow-minded.

ONE IN NEED OF ADVICE.—The worms can be destroyed by fumigating the wood with benzine, or saturating it with a strong solution of corrosive sublimate, but such strong measures might not, we fear, suit your instrument. They have sometimes been driven out or killed by forcing sweet oil persistently into delicate pieces of furniture and stopping up the holes afterwards with a mixture of gum arabic and gelatine.

D. E.—Lines of longitude go from pole to pole, lines of latitude go round the earth; they are invented by astronomers to furnish a means of fixing the localities of places on the earth, and are counted from the meridian of some place, which is fixed as starting point—from Greenwich in British and United States maps, the space between two lines is measured by the time the sun takes to travel it, hence the reference to hours and minutes.

M. S.—If you refer to a varnish for waterproof goods, the following will be found a good recipe: Let a quart of a pound of India-rubber, in small pieces, soften in half a pound of oil of turpentine; then add two pounds of boiled linseed oil, and let the whole boil for two hours over a slow coal fire. When dissolved, add again six pounds of boiled linseed oil and one pound of litharge and boil until an even liquid is obtained. It is applied warm, and forms a waterproof coating.

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